



May 20, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

It has been two months since many of us first suspended our in-person worship and other activities in our churches. In the time since then, we have proven that we **can** facilitate rapid change in the Church when it comes to the health and safety of our members and communities! We have created new, virtual forms of worship, reached out to one another to provide ongoing care and support, continued to conduct necessary business and decision-making — and we have done all of it with grace, patience, and a good sense of humor necessary for these days.

Now we are shifting into yet another season of this pandemic, when once again we as churches must make critical decisions about how we will move forward given evolving information and circumstances. Last week, Governor Tim Walz announced that the stay-at-home order in Minnesota would end as of May 18. In regard to businesses, retail, offices, and various other settings, the “dial” has begun to turn to provide more freedom among Minnesotans. The Governor’s new “Stay Safe Minnesota” plan now allows for up to ten people to gather, while still utilizing the practices of physical distancing, wearing of masks, and handwashing. The plan continues to urge caution for those at highest risk of contracting COVID-19.

In theory, churches may now also allow for groups of up to 10 people, assuming the above precautions. While that doesn’t change much for most of us in terms of in-person worship, it may prompt questions about the possibility of other small group gatherings in our churches. And as the social setting dial continues to advance forward, including for houses of worship, other questions will arise.

In a Zoom meeting on May 18, a diverse group of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish leaders gathered with Commissioner John Harrington of the Minnesota Department of Public Safety and officials from the Governor’s office and the Minnesota Department of Health. We were asked to offer input to the Governor on guidelines particular to faith communities. In a follow-up meeting on May 19, we offered additional input. All of this followed a previous conversation of judicatory leaders directly with the Governor. Three things have become clear from those calls:

- The faith community writ large in Minnesota is not of one accord on the question of when and how to resume in-person activities in our places of worship. Certain elements of the Christian tradition, in particular, seem intent on pushing for fewer restrictions on worship on a more rapid timeline than others in the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities feel is wise.
- The state is likely to offer guidance to faith communities within the next 5-10 days, setting tiered criteria based on building capacity alongside limits on the total number of people allowed in our buildings.
- The state's guidance to faith communities will include "dial back" and "dial forward" recommendations. We have asked the Governor to also address questions about outdoor worship, house church gatherings, and whether guidelines will be statewide or modified based on county-level data.

Given the three points above, I have decided to issue my own guidance to our UCC congregations now. This document will name a set of broader questions to consider, as well as a longer list of items to attend to as you prepare for various phases ahead. It will not, however, provide detailed specific guidance on data-based phasing for resuming in-person worship and other activities. It seems best to await the state's language and recommendations for phasing rather than risk creating confusion. Once the state has announced its guidelines, I will be certain to share with all of you. In the meantime, **I urge you to resist any temptation to rush back to in-person activities.** Our discernment now is of enormous importance and should be steeped in prayer and informed by careful, deliberate conversation among church leaders.

My hope is that the sum total of what I offer today and what the state will soon provide will help you in that discernment. Ultimately, it is of course up to each of our congregations to make decisions, utilizing all information provided and drawing on your own deep wisdom. This is *incredibly* challenging. It requires us to engage in a moral calculus of astonishing consequence. There are so many unknowns in all of this. But this much we *do* know: we love and miss our church families, we want to be faithful, and we want to make smart decisions that will safeguard our congregants' health, our own health, and that of our communities. We've also learned this much during this pandemic: we are a resilient people capable of far more than we realized! I continue to be amazed by all of you and give thanks for you.

Be gentle with yourselves. Trust that God is powerfully in the midst of your discernment and in your new ways of being Church. Have faith, too, that God is carving a path through this that we may struggle to see. This is but one small season in God's grand story and we shall journey our way through it as God's people always have: faithfully, imperfectly, and with unshakable hope.

Grace and peace,

Reverend Shari Prestemon, Conference Minister

STAY SAFE, MINNESOTA CONFERENCE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

The following set of considerations and guidance is offered after reviewing dozens of documents and having numerous conversations with other UCC Conference Ministers, ecumenical leaders, and the Minnesota Department of Health, Department of Public Safety, and Governor's office. Some of the most pertinent documents are provided in a resource section at the conclusion of this document.

High-level Questions to Consider First

Is it “essential” for you to resume in-person worship and other activities at this time?

Some in Minnesota's wider faith community have expressed disgruntlement that places like Home Depot and retail stores have been considered more “essential” than houses of worship in the state's re-opening process. The question here is not whether our faith and faith communities are “essential” to our lives as people of faith; we know they are! The question is whether flinging open our church building doors is “essential” to practicing our faith and advancing the recovery of our communities. We know our churches provide life-giving, Spirit-nurturing meaning to our members and communities as well as often important services. Consider whether or not resuming in-person activities is necessary (while infection rates are still high) to the fulfillment of your mission and purpose. Can you still fulfill your mission and purpose while worshiping, meeting, and planning virtually? What, if any, in-person activities are “essential” to the operation of your church life that you would feel confident about resuming given all known factors?

Would your in-person activities, whether worship or otherwise, allow for “contact predictability”?

The state lists three critical factors for safely resuming activities: 1) how close you are to another person in a given setting or activity; 2) how long you are in close proximity to another person; 3) how predictable the setting is. The first two factors can be addressed by various means discussed elsewhere in this document. The third –contact predictability–may pose a unique challenge for our churches. It is in our nature as church to gravitate toward one another. Hugs, pats on the back, shaking hands, laughter & enthusiastic conversation are commonplace when we gather. Many of our congregations are intergenerational and children's behavior can be naturally unpredictable. Many of our practices, like singing, Holy Communion, passing the peace, or taking the offering, are high-touch, high-risk practices during this pandemic. How successfully can you manage contact predictability if you resume in-person activities?

What implications do the demographics of your congregation have for resuming in-person activities?

Individuals who are 65 years or older, those who have underlying health conditions, and minority communities are at particular risk for COVID-19 infection. For many of our churches, one or more of these sub-populations is predominant in our membership. Many of these persons are also likely among those most devoted to regular worship attendance and engagement in other activities and may feel

most drawn to attending should you resume in-person worship. Their health and safety should be a strong consideration in your planning. Our faith calls us to put the needs of the most vulnerable in the center of all we do and of how we understand our ministry as Church. How will that Biblical mandate inform your decisions?

Will your facility spaces allow for proper physical distancing?

For the foreseeable future, physical distancing of at least six feet will still be a requirement. Whether attendance limits allowed by state guidelines are up to 10, 25, or 50 people, or at some percent of capacity, how many people can your physical space safely accommodate? Consider physical distancing requirements for worship leaders and attendees in the sanctuary or elsewhere, traffic patterns to allow for separate entrances and exits, ability to limit flow of people into the building at any given time, and restroom facilities.

How will our decisions as faith communities now impact the wider public health of our communities & state?

Collectively, the Minnesota Conference UCC has approximately 26,000 people and 125 congregations. The broader interfaith community in Minnesota boasts more than 2 million people. Thus, the decisions we make as places of worship, and how we manage the inherent risks of gathering, have potentially enormous consequences for our communities, neighbors, and state. What we do, when we do it, and how we do it all matter greatly. The stakes are high.

Phasing-In a Resumption of In-person Activities

The State of Minnesota will soon release specific guidance to places of worship. That guidance will likely be tied to infection rates and will invite places of worship to “dial forward” based on the percent of building capacity and hard ceilings on numbers of people (whichever is smaller). This document will not attempt to pre-empt that guidance and we do not wish to create undue confusion. We do, however, want to offer a few words for your consideration.

Don’t rush to resume in-person activities. In Governor Walz’s address on May 13 he said, “Do not charge forward as if everything is normal.” And even though the Governor pushed the “dial” forward to allow for further opening of the state, he also remarked that “this can go in a bad direction very quickly” and that those who are able to are “strongly encouraged” to continue to stay home. We should heed these words.

Respect public health data. The CDC and others recommend looking at 14-day gating criteria, combined with availability of PPE and testing, when considering when to move forward. The first “gate” would be two weeks of declining COVID-19 cases, which prompts an allowance of up to 10 people gathered, growing to an allowance of 50 people maximum at 8 weeks of declining cases. ***In Minnesota, we have not yet seen two weeks of declining COVID-19 cases; our numbers are in fact still growing rapidly.*** These facts urge extreme care and caution for all of us and should be taken into account. Further, until a vaccine is available for distribution to all, some measure of physical distancing and modified behavior

will be needed. This may mean that ***in-person worship for many of us is not likely warranted for at least another two months***. It also means that modified, carefully managed behavior and practices will be necessary longer-term until a vaccine can be widely and equitably distributed.

The State of Minnesota is already providing guidance that is more aggressive than the gating criteria referenced above. It is under growing pressure from some faith leaders to accelerate more freedoms for churches. Once it issues its guidance to faith communities, view them in light of that and utilize your own best discretion given all data and factors.

It's up to you. In the United Church of Christ, ultimate decision-making lies with the local church. The Conference or National Setting cannot tell you what to do; we can only provide resources, our best guidance, and our abiding prayers. As your leaders convene to determine your path forward, we urge you to rely on all the information available to you, along with your best collective wisdom. Keep the health of your congregants, your community, our state, and the most vulnerable front and center. And as always, take time to listen for God's wisdom and guidance in the midst of it all. How is God calling you to fully and faithfully "be the Church" in this unique moment?

Details & Plans

There is a long list of things to think about and plan for before you resume any in-person activities. We offer just a sampling. The plans you make should be shared transparently with all your congregants in order to assist each in making a decision about whether to attend resumed in-person activities. Again, we are **not** suggesting that now is the time to resume any in-person activities. We **are** urging you to thoroughly consider all these factors before making any decision and to plan accordingly when you decide to resume in-person activities.

Physical Distancing: Practicing six feet of distance between individuals will continue to be the norm for the foreseeable future. "Family pods" – those who are together in a household – may sit together, but that is the only exception. Consider marking your spaces (sanctuary, pews, other seating) to guide people toward proper distancing & plan to utilize only every other row of pews/chairs even then. Think about how to force traffic patterns in your building that will help manage distancing and prevent face-to-face encounters. Some may consider offering more than one worship service in order to accommodate physical distancing requirements and the number of those who want to attend (though this creates additional burden on pastors and other worship leaders).

Worship Practices: All worship practices should be modified to be no-touch and physically distanced. This should include passing the peace, taking the offering, consecration, and distribution of Holy Communion. Do not pass a microphone between one worship leader and another without at least sterilizing it first. Consider shortening your worship service to minimize the amount of time congregants and worship leaders are in the same space. Do not provide any refreshments before or after worship.

Drive-In worship & outdoor worship: The Minnesota Department of Health has provided guidance about drive-in worship and has been asked to do the same in regards to outdoor worship. While outdoor environments do pose lower risk, they do not eliminate risk and can present difficulties to manage movement. We do not advise that you provide portable restrooms. Physical distancing, no-touch practices, and masks should still be utilized. If you hold drive-in or outdoor worship on your own church property, no permit should be needed, but it's advisable to be in touch with local authorities if you intend to do so.

Weddings, Funerals, and Baptisms: The impact of the pandemic on these important and sacred moments cannot be underestimated. Couples have had to postpone or seriously curtail their plans for their most joyous day of nuptials. Grieving families have suffered additional loss by not being able to gather with a larger group of family and friends to celebrate their loved one's life. Families who anticipated the happy day of a baptism surrounded by the congregational community who would help nurture their loved one's faith have also needed to be postponed. Unfortunately, modified plans and/or postponements will continue to be necessary. The MN Department of Health has previously issued guidance regarding funerals, and for now only graveside services are still advised; other services may be phased back in according to wider guidance about gatherings. Weddings must also follow broader public health guidance and be either reduced in size or postponed. Baptisms are likely best postponed. Each of these events also constitute "unpredictable settings" given their nature, and therefore pose higher risk. When done, each of these ceremonies should be carefully examined and all elements modified as needed to comply with physical distancing and other safety factors.

Screening: Consider what level of screening you will want to do as individuals enter your building. At minimum, remind congregants regularly that if they are in high risk categories or not feeling well they must stay home. Masks should be required for all entering the building; will they need to provide their own masks or will the church have a supply ready for all? Consider whether your screening will include temperature checks at the door. The Henningson & Snoxell document in the resource listing provides more information.

Custodial Needs: Resuming in-person activities in your church building will necessitate increased custodial attention. All surfaces that anyone may touch in a sanctuary or other spaces will need to be disinfected immediately after activities end and attendees depart. Restrooms will require disinfection after each use. What plan will you have for making sure cleaning is done thoroughly, consistently, and in a timely way? If you have paid custodial services, can your budget absorb the additional cost? Whether you have volunteer or paid custodial services, what are the risks to these persons in doing this work?

Singing: Congregational singing is a staple of our worship life and an aspect of our gatherings many of us love. Unfortunately, most experts tell us it is not advised for the foreseeable future, even with masks on. The amount of droplets and aerosolization that occurs while singing is simply too risky, and masks cannot entirely prevent this. Two links are provided in the resource listing with more information.

Safety Stewards: When you resume in-person activities, adhering to stringent safety protocols will be key. But we are only human, and the necessary practices will be difficult for everyone to understand.

Some people may feel precautions are unnecessary and may be tempted to not abide by them as a result. Others will fail to follow precautions unintentionally, perhaps just as a normal reaction to seeing someone they have not seen for months. Identify and train “safety stewards” in your church who will be charged with reminding people of necessary practices and seeing that they follow them. This should be someone other than the pastor.

Insurance & Legal: Be sure to consult with your insurance provider as you develop and implement your plans for resuming in-person activities. Most will have their own guidance for you to consider. Resources from the United Church Insurance Board are included in the listing at the conclusion of this document. Also note the advice of our Conference Attorney, Jim Snoxell, and his law firm provided in that same resource listing.

Renters & other users of your space: Many of our churches rely heavily on rental income and risk enormous financial loss if renters cannot operate normally and utilize space as intended. Other churches welcome non-paying community and support groups to utilize their space on a regular basis as an important element of their community outreach. You have a responsibility as the owner of the building to ensure all those who utilize the building are following guidelines consistent with your own plan. Having careful, deliberate conversation with building users and sharing your plan with them will help you feel more confident about the safety and health of those groups and your congregants.

Hybrid Worship & Activities: Even if you determine, based on public health guidelines and scientific data, that it is safe to resume in-person activities at some level over time, there will surely be those among your membership who will not feel safe doing so or whose risk factors may prevent them from doing so. The skills you have cultivated during these last two months will serve you well as you continue to provide virtual options for worship and other activities alongside in-person experiences. Maintain a robust plan to continue providing worship, pastoral care, Bible studies, faith formation, coffee hour, and governance meetings virtually. Providing hybrid, synchronous experiences may present new technological questions and challenges, so rally your best technology wizards for this new phase.

Activities with children. Growing evidence suggests that children are not as immune to COVID-19 as originally thought. Avoid the temptation to gather children in person for faith formation, Bible School, or other activities. A resource is provided later in this document specific to faith formation questions.

Finances: Some of our churches may be experiencing financial distress because of the inability to take normal weekly offerings, lost rental income, or other factors. If you need help creating an online giving option for your members, be in touch with the Conference office & we’ll help you do that. Also be aware of the grant and loan programs being offered by the Conference to assist you financially. Those links are provided in the resource listing at the conclusion of this document.

When someone gets sick: What will you do if someone who attended an in-person activity in your church building (or outdoors) becomes infected with COVID-19? First, urge your members to always contact the pastor or other leader to notify the church they have become ill so you can take proper action. Take attendance of everyone at each activity and maintain that log of attendance for three weeks after each gathering/meeting. If you learn someone has developed symptoms or become ill with

the Coronavirus, all others who attended that same gathering should be notified without revealing the name of the person who is sick. Those individuals should then notify their health care practitioner immediately and follow their guidance in regard to self-isolating, testing, and other steps. In addition, your church should also contact local public health authorities and immediately discontinue all in-person activities until a later date when public health officials deem it safe again.

Be prepared to dial back: The course of COVID-19 in our state is unpredictable. Some experts are predicting a resurgence of the virus in the Fall. Thus, our ability to resume more and more in-person activities will not be a straight line forward. Congregational leadership should continue to monitor public health data in the state and in your county and be prepared at all times to “dial back” to an earlier phase of virtual or in-person gatherings. Make sure your church plan is clear about what will necessitate a dialing back and how you will do that.

Final Thoughts

This pandemic has introduced a time of loss, sorrow, and collective trauma for all of us. Some have lost loved ones to COVID-19. Others have lost employment and find themselves in a serious financial crisis. Most of us miss the routines and freedoms we had before COVID-19. We long to gather with our friends and family in familiar ways, to feel safe again, and yes, to worship in the ways and spaces so precious to us.

As you discern your congregation’s path forward, be kind to one another, recognizing that people will be in different places on the continuum of emotion — some eager and happy to re-gather, some deeply fearful at even the thought, others simply overwhelmed by all that has transpired. Find ways to hear and honor all these complicated feelings.

Throughout all of this, our love for God and neighbor has been central. Our impulse to seek the welfare of the city and the broader community has been strong. These Biblical principles should continue to guide us now. And we should also remember that “for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven” (Ecclesiastes 3:1). This particular season has taught us so much about ourselves, about our church life, and about our interconnectedness as communities, a nation, and a Conference. May we receive these lessons with grace and allow them to continue shaping our life together in this difficult season and in every season to follow.

Resources

[CDC Interim Guidance for Communities of Faith](#)

[CDC Coronavirus Resources](#)

[COVID Act Now: Real Time Metrics & Models for Every County.](#)

[Minnesota Department of Health May 13 Guidance](#) for Faith-Based Communities Considering In-Person Worship

[MN Department of Health May 13 Guidance for Vehicle Gatherings](#) (e.g. Drive-In Worship)

[Singing, The Church, and COVID-19](#)

[American Choral Directors Association Webinar](#) and [unofficial summary](#)

[Questions to Address Before Resuming In-Person Faith Formation Programing](#)

[Minnesota Conference: COVID-19 Resource Page](#)

[Minnesota Conference: May 13 Clergy/Lay Leaders Call](#), Resuming In-Person Worship

[Minnesota Conference: Grants & Loans](#)

[UCC: A Clear & Strong Message](#)

[UCC: COVID-19 & The Church \(multiple resources\)](#)

[UCC Insurance Board Resources](#)

[Wisconsin Council of Churches: Returning to Church](#)

[Dr. Michael Osterholm, ELCA Informational Webinar](#)

[Henningson & Snoxell: Balancing Rewards and Risks](#)