



## Guidance for Resuming In-Person Gatherings In the Heartland Conference, United Church of Christ

*“Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”*

*Philippians 2:4*

This resource has been designed to be a starting point for meaningful conversation among your local church leaders as you develop your own protocol or policy for resuming in-person gatherings (worship, classes, working in the office). It reflects our deep and abiding love for one another and for our neighbors and highlights our common desire to nurture the health and welfare of the people in our congregations and our communities.

What we know about the spread and risks of the coronavirus has changed significantly since the pandemic began. These guidelines reflect what we know now. They are derived from a variety of scientific, ministry, and government sources. Recommendations can vary depending on the context for which they are written so it is important to heed regulations and guidance offered by your state and local officials.

### 1. Encourage People to Be Vaccinated

Polls in December 2020 indicated about 60% of people are willing to be vaccinated. The more people in each congregation who are vaccinated the safer it will be for churches to resume meeting in person. Some individuals will not be eligible for the vaccine based on their health conditions.

Partnering with community health organizations offering information about vaccines, supporting people as they express anxiety about receiving or not qualifying for a vaccination, and listening to and providing opportunities for your members to relate their vaccination experiences will be important aspects of pastoral ministry in months to come. Care Teams can provide valuable ministry in this regard.

Some recommend waiting until vaccination levels reach 50-75% before considering in-person gatherings. We find this recommendation to be reasonable. However, we do NOT recommend requiring vaccinations as a condition for participation. People do need to be reminded to stay home if they are feeling sick in any way.

### 2. Assess the Outbreak Level

[COVIDActNow](#) remains the standard recommended by the Heartland Conference for determining the outbreak level in a specific state or county. COVIDActNow uses a five-tiered rating system:



- Severe outbreak
- Active or imminent outbreak
- At risk of outbreak
- Slow disease growth
- On track to contain COVID

Ratings may be viewed by state or by county by toggling the blue switch at the top of the map.

The Heartland Conference recommendations are keyed to outbreak level:



- Severe outbreak – All church gatherings in person are suspended.
- Active or imminent outbreak – No in-person groups over 20 people; see section 3
- At risk of outbreak – follow guidelines under section 3
- Slow disease growth – follow guidelines under section 3
- On track to contain COVID – follow guidelines under section 3

Both county and state data need to be considered when making decisions. Always follow the restrictions imposed by local and state authorities before following these guidelines.

### **3. Determine and Communicate the Risks of Gatherings**

Return to in-person gatherings will happen in small and measured ways. Not all churches will resume in-person gatherings at the same time, nor will it be safe to resume all of the activities in a church at the same time. Group size impacts the risk for spreading COVID19. Small group gatherings will be safe to resume before large group gatherings.

We recommend that local church leaders use the [COVID-19 Event Risk Assessment Planning Tool](#) to determine the risk an in-person gathering of people might pose to participants. This tool, provided by the Georgia Institute of Technology, determines *“the estimated chance (0-100%) that at least 1 COVID-19 positive individual will be present at an event in a county, given the size of the event. This is not the same as the risk of any person being exposed or infected with COVID-19 at the event.”* Knowing the likelihood of one COVID19-positive person being present at an event, church leaders can decide if the benefits of holding the event outweigh the possibility of exposing participants to a COVID positive person.

In your congregation’s protocol or policy for holding in-person gatherings you will need to determine the thresholds you will use to allow gatherings of various sizes to take place. Thresholds will include both group size and the risk factor. For example:

- If a group of 50 people in a given county had a risk factor of 86%, there is an 86% chance of someone infected with COVID19 being present at a gathering of 50 people. There is a 33% chance of someone infected with COVID19 being present at a gathering of 10 people.

We strongly recommend that in-person gatherings take place only when the risk factor is less than 50% for a group regardless of size if all participants have been vaccinated, and 25% or less for a group regardless of size if all participants have been NOT been vaccinated. We also recommend that mitigation strategies including masks and social distancing remain in place for all in-person gatherings at which the risk factor is greater than 0%.

#### 4. Mitigate Viral Spread

“[CDC recommends a layered strategy](#) to reduce exposures to SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. This includes using multiple mitigation strategies with several layers of safeguards to reduce the spread of disease and lower the risk of exposure.” Budgeting for mitigation strategies is necessary.

- **Masks** need to be worn by all participants during the entire duration of all in-person gatherings regardless of size or the vaccination status of participants for the foreseeable future. People [who are asymptomatic, who have recovered from COVID19, and even people who have been vaccinated can spread the virus](#) to other people. Social distancing does not reduce the need for wearing masks. Social distancing [works in tandem](#) with social distancing. [Vaccination does not prevent an individual from being infected with the virus, spreading it, or contracting COVID19](#); vaccinations can reduce the chance of someone becoming ill and can reduce the severity of a person’s illness if they are infected.
- **Social Distancing** practices need to continue at all in-person activities regardless of size for the foreseeable future. The distance currently [recommended by the CDC is at least 6 feet](#). Both early and recent scientific studies suggest a larger distance is necessary for activities that include public speaking, and especially [singing](#). After review of many [sources](#), the [CDC definition of ‘close contact,’](#) the typical duration of church gatherings, and because [“successful infection = exposure to virus x time.”](#) the Heartland Conference recommends 9 feet when planning for social distancing in worship, interactive study groups, fellowship conversations etc. For [performers and public speakers](#) the Heartland Conference recommends 12 to 15 feet between performers and between performers and their audience. The number of persons involved in any gathering needs to be limited by the event location’s capacity for maintaining social distance.
- **Hand washing** remains a CDC recommended COVID19 mitigation strategy. This is especially important when performing sacraments, distributing communion, and other activities that involve passing items between individuals. Wearing gloves and planning contactless methods for common activities in worship remain best practices. Maintaining a “low touch environment” is a best practice for in-person gatherings.
- **Cleaning surfaces** was a major emphasis early in the pandemic. Recommendations have changed since the pandemic began. The current CDC recommendations include:
  - Areas unoccupied for 7 or more days need only routine cleaning. Maintain existing cleaning practices for outdoor areas. Routinely disinfect frequently touched surfaces at least daily. The [latest CDC guidance about cleaning surfaces](#) is available online.
- **Ventilation and air flow** play critical roles in mitigating the spread of COVID19 according to [recently published research](#). In December 2020, the [CDC updated guidelines for ventilation](#) in buildings. The Heartland Conference strongly recommends implementing as many of those guidelines as possible. Highlights include:

- Increase outdoor air ventilation, using caution in highly polluted areas.
- Decrease occupancy in areas where outdoor ventilation cannot be increased.
- Increase airflow to occupied spaces when possible.
- Set HVAC fans to the “on” position for all occupied area of the building; turn off any demand-controlled ventilation (DCV) controls that reduce air supply based on occupancy or temperature during occupied hours.
- Open outdoor air dampers beyond minimum settings to reduce or eliminate HVAC air recirculation.
- Ensure exhaust fans (restroom, kitchen) are functional and operating at full capacity when the building is occupied.
- Consider portable high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) fan/filtration systems to help enhance air cleaning.
- Generate clean-to-less-clean air movement by re-evaluating the positioning of supply and exhaust air diffusers and/or dampers.

Research also indicates care be taken to avoid seating persons in the direct stream of air flowing into or out of a room. Please consult the complete [CDC Guidelines for Ventilation in Buildings](#).

## 5. Outdoor Events

We recommend holding in-person gatherings outdoors whenever possible. Outdoor gatherings need to [include other mitigation strategies](#) including masks and social distancing as discussed above. Drive-in events are one form of outdoor gathering and need to include wearing masks and social distance between vehicles particularly when windows are open; the distance between vehicles provided by regular parking spaces is not sufficient to meet social distance guidelines.

## 6. Renters

Share these guidelines with outside groups wanting to use your facility. Allow users to your building only if they follow your church’s policies. Start with one (1) organization at a time. Cap the total number of groups using the building in a way that prevents outside groups from coming into contact with one another. Require the group to take responsibility for the space they are using (cleaning, set up, returning space to pre-use condition). Groups need to be told that if they do not agree to or do not follow your church policy they will lose the privilege of using the space.

## 7. Working From Home

Staff members experience unique and increased risks to COVID exposure because of the close contact required when performing their duties in person. This is amplified when individuals have pre-existing conditions placing them at higher risk for negative outcomes if they contract COVID19. We recommend that local churches make reasonable accommodations for staff members (including clergy) to work from home, even if your local church decides to resume in-person gatherings. [If staff members are working in their offices](#), we recommend following the [CDC Guidance for Businesses and Employers](#) to maintain a safe working environment.

**The Heartland Conference strongly recommends sharing these guidelines and recommendations with congregation members and outside groups.** The Conference and Association staff are available as conversation partners as you develop your local church policy and protocols. You are

not alone. Our covenant together means your church can tap into the thoughts, practices, and wisdom of all leaders, churches and communities.

### **Prayer for Resuming In-Person Gatherings**

*God of Wholeness and Healing, we worry about our future as a congregation because of the impact not being together in person has on our life in community. Fill us with your guidance and courage as we make decisions about how and when to resume hosting in-person church gatherings safely as quickly as possible. We pray for an end to this pandemic even as we acknowledge our the part we play in the answer to our prayers. Protect the health and vitality of our members, our staff, and our neighbors. Thank you for your call to serve our communities in these times benevolently and with leadership. In your healing love we pray, Amen.*

### **Resources**

Center for Disease Control

- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/socialdistancing.html#:~:text=To%20practice%20social%20or%20physical,both%20indo or%20and%20outdoor%20spaces.>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-buildingfacility.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/communitymitigation.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/ventilation.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/diy-cloth-facecoverings.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/guidancecommunity-faith-organizations.html>

Kentucky Public Health - <https://govstatus.egov.com/kycovid19>

Ohio Department of Public Health - <https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/covid-19/home>

West Virginia County Public Health - <https://dhhr.wv.gov/COVID-19/Pages/default.aspx>

Heartland Conference and COVID-19 Resources may be found at [www.heartlanducc.org](http://www.heartlanducc.org) by clicking on the “COVID 19 Resources” tile

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER AS WE PLAN FOR THE RESUMPTION OF GATHERING IN-PERSON

- ü What staffing patterns do we need? Can we share staff with other congregations?
- ü How can we sustainably meet the demands of doing ministry in new ways?
- ü How can in-person and online worship both happen so that staff and volunteers are not burned out and find ministry life-giving rather than life-draining?
- ü Are we talking with all of our stakeholders?
- ü What are our clergy and staff members saying about the sustainability of our ministry in an environment that will require a continued online presence while at the same time restarting in person gatherings?
- ü What methods are obsolete? What can we let go of to create capacity for embracing new things?
- ü What were we paying for in our pre-pandemic ministry model? Do we still need to pay for that? in the same or in a different way?
- ü What new things do we need to pay for moving forward?
- ü What new skills do we need to encourage our staff members to develop?
- ü How do current position descriptions match our needs moving forward? What needs adjusted?