

Beloved Penn Northeast Conference congregations,

Grace, Mercy, Peace and a little of the Wisdom of Solomon to you all!

I needed clothes. And you gave them to me. I was sick. And you took care of me. I was in prison. And you came to visit me.’ “Then the people who have done what is right will answer him. ‘Lord,’ they will ask, ‘when did we see you hungry and feed you? When did we see you thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you as a stranger and invite you in? When did we see you needing clothes and give them to you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ Matthew 25:36-39

“All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are beneficial...Let no one seek their own, but the well-being of our neighbor. 1 Corinthians 10:23-24

It feels strange to make a recommendation about when to resume in-person worship to our beloved congregations. Nevertheless, we feel it is our covenantal responsibility to offer the following recommendations knowing that each of you may well have different considerations and pressures which guide your decision-making process. We offer these in prayerful encouragement as you discern your congregation’s future, knowing that your decisions may include struggling with your future ministry.

Our UCC focus is on Love of Neighbor, Love of Children and Love of Creation. As we reopen our congregations to gathering, it is love of neighbor and love of each other which form the basis of these considerations. We also want to point out that what is legally allowed may actually conflict with what is best for you and your congregation. For instance, is it in the best interest of the safety and health of your congregation and your neighbors to reopen, even if the authorities give permission? Should we reopen quickly, fearful that if we do not our congregation will not survive? Would this not expose greater numbers of people to exposure to COVID-19, affecting the welfare of the very people we are trying to reach with the good news of God’s love? Our neighbors and our communities will be observing what we as congregations choose to do.

With these tensions in mind, we offer the following recommendations which also take into account Pennsylvania’s planned three stage opening and the current CDC guidelines.

- Churches that have been worshipping and ministering virtually should continue this ministry even when it is prudent to worship in person as well.
- When you do resume in-person worship, please remember that it will not be the worship experience you had prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Implementing measures to mitigate and reduce the spread of COVID-19 is an expectation of our members, the public and our state public health guidelines.
- Live in covenant with each other by planning and implementing mitigation measures before you choose to resume in-person worship and other ministries. A plan needs to address who should not attend in-person, how to ensure a safe and clean worship environment, and how to meet current public health protocols for gatherings of people.

- Involve the Pastor, the congregational staff, the congregational leadership, health care professionals and others in your congregation in developing this plan.
- Take a breath. Pause. Discern. Plan. Communicate. Communicate! Communicate!*
- Your neighbors and members need to know what to expect when they do show up.
- If you reasonably expect more than 25 people gathering for worship, it is recommended that you do not re-open in-person worship until such time as public health policy changes and allows large groups to gather again.

As we live in covenant, we want to prevent having any of our congregations or ministries from becoming the source for a local outbreak of COVID-19. We can find ways to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 before there are effective treatments, but only with clear and consistent preventative measures.

The public health authorities and the Governor have offered a multi-phase process for re-opening our communities. Until the final phase of reopening, gatherings of more than 25 people are prohibited.) There have been suggestions that places of worship can meet in limited capacities (less than 25 attendees, including the pastor, organist and others) when a region enters the Yellow Phase, and then with larger attendance ***only if*** the church is able to meet the standards set out by the CDC and health departments that can prevent further spread. The Pennsylvania plans (presented in the table below) provide a framework for steps to take to mitigate the virus's spread and to gradually re-establish our in-person connections.

Worship Considerations

Church Events/Activities

Action	Red Phase	Yellow Phase	Green Phase
In Summary:	Church services should not be conducted in person.	Yellow means proceed with caution and may be viewed as a planning and preparation phase, rather than a full reopening phase	Even after moving into the green phase, social distancing measures will likely still need to be maintained to keep people safe and healthy.
In-person worship	No	No more than 25 total attending,	Yes, with limitations on who should attend. Those considered high-risk should be encouraged to continue virtual worship.
Physical Distance	Not applicable – services not conducted.	Minimum of 6 feet separating family units. Masks required for all attendees above 2 years old.	Yes as long as recommended by CDC
Personal Touch Rituals	No	No	Consider modifying your rituals to minimize contact
Food Events	No	No	Possibly, but not if masks are mandated
In-Person Meetings (committees, Bible Study, AA, Scouts, others)	No	No more than 25 total attending. Masks and social distancing required.	Yes, following CDC guidelines regarding masks and social distancing
Office Opened to Public	No	No	Yes

Action	Red Phase	Yellow Phase	Green Phase
Mission/Outreach Events	No onsite-gatherings. Curbside or Drive-by food pantry and similar activities allowed provided masks, social distancing and limits on the number present at any given time are enforced	Very Limited onsite activity. Rules regarding masks, social distancing and limitations on attendees must be followed.	Yes following CDC recommendations
Church Rentals	No	Allowed, following CDC recommendations	Yes as long as CDC guidelines for gathering and sanitation are met

Other Considerations in Yellow Phase

In any case, to reduce the incidence of severe, possibly life-threatening disease, individuals over the age of 65 and/or who have health conditions that make them more vulnerable, or who live with others with such conditions should continue to avoid in-person gatherings as much as possible. Please know that the individuals over 65 that we mention also includes our pastors. We want our pastors to be as safe as our congregational participants. If the church pastor, organist, liturgists, etc. are over 65 we need to maintain social-distancing and stay-at-home standards.

- Yellow Phase gatherings can begin church worship leaders (ushers, readers, etc.):
 - o Are younger than 65
 - o Have no auto-immune or underlying health issues
 - o Will wear mask, gloves, and practice social distancing
- Offerings can be left in basket/plate by to sanctuary door. Counters should consider wearing gloves and should wash hands after counting. People should be encouraged to give electronically, by credit card, use their bank’s payment program of sending checks out, give on-line via pay pal or credit card, or via texting. Congregations are strongly encouraged to invest in any technology that will be “giving friendly” to members and friends.
- Communion elements can be brought from home for each individual/family to use in the pew or served by one person (masked and gloved) up front with individual cups and bread/host/wafers placed in people’s hands. Passing of trays should be avoided until further notice.
- Post signs that the congregation is following CDC guidelines for everyone’s health and safety including:

- Wearing a mask is required.
- Discourage those who have a fever, those who have been to high-risk areas and those who may have been exposed to COVID to not attend.
- This may include health care professionals as well as visitors.
- Develop a congregational plan to follow CDC guidelines if a parishioner, a visitor, or someone who uses the building tests positive for COVID.

There is so much “data” and “guidance” being offered that it is hard to know what to believe or who to trust. We hope that this information has been helpful for you in your plans for reopening our in-person worship gatherings. However, please keep in mind that, whether we gather together in person, on the computer or just in our hearts, God is with all of us in this walk through a very scary valley.