

Remote Faith Formation...For the Long Haul with Guidelines for Re-Entry

A resource for faith formation ministries during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond

As soon as churches began closing their physical doors and opening to the world online, we began seeing the internet and social media channels overflow with resources, links and ideas about how to navigate this new world. Faith formation leaders found themselves in a territory that they had been considering and tinkering in but now it was their new reality. The questions emerged. How do we offer faith formation and Christian education on-line? What about those that aren't comfortable on a digital platform? How do we connect to our youngest and our oldest? How much is too much when families are already having to juggle work from home and teaching their children? How are we supporting our faith communities and being responsive to their needs? Even as we move to re-enter our churches and begin some gatherings, we will still be considering maintaining some sort of online presence and we will all be wrestling with what the new normal for church looks like.

Take a breath. God's grace abounds. This is a time of crisis in our world and anxiety is high. The situation changes by the day and sometimes the hour. Each member of our faith community has a set of circumstances to navigate and it is complicated for leaders to respond to those needs. Whether you are an educator, pastor, youth director or volunteer, this isn't exactly what you signed up for so don't forget to give yourself grace and time to redefine your new role. It may seem like you need to have immediate resources for members, but this is a marathon and not a sprint. Take time to discern, keeping in mind that relationships and human connection are the most critical needs. We are now navigating a new normal. Communicate with your leadership what your new role as a faith formation leader looks like. Remember that you will need sabbath. Take your vacation and study leave even if it's going to be "at-home"!

Develop rituals and routines for the long haul. You know your faith community the best. There have been many resources developed during this time, but it can be overwhelming to leaders and to those we serve. Zoom and remote worship fatigue may start to set in. Consider equipping households to develop simple faith formation rituals and routines that are sustainable. What faith practices can bridge home and church for the long haul? Ask them what they have most connected with during this time. Practice those rituals together and be as intentionally intergenerational as you can.

We will continue to have people not able to join in-person gatherings. Many of us have been experimenting in digital faith formation because we desire to reach beyond those that are able to attend our programming and worship in person. We continue to hear stories from churches that they are connecting with new people and people that they haven't seen for a while during this crisis. How will we keep engaging these new people that we have connected with? Remember that there will continue to be members that will have delayed re-entry for a variety of reasons. Consider putting a plan in place that includes long term strategies for home faith formation.

Guidelines for Re-entry to Education/Formation Programs

As your faith community leaders make plans for returning to the sanctuary for worship, make sure there are also plans for re-entry for educational programs, youth groups, nurseries and other gatherings. In many cases, small group gatherings might take place before physically worshipping in the sanctuary. These guidelines and phases

may take you into the fall, winter and beyond. For each of these areas you will also want to consider the hygiene and specific personal protective equipment that will be needed and recommended. Each faith community will need to consider their circumstances. Consider the following guidelines and questions.

Education/Formation Classes

Many faith communities have been meeting by zoom and delivering studies and packets to homes during this time. You may be ready to ease into other types of gatherings and classes. You might be considering these small gatherings ahead of getting back into the sanctuary.

- Consider retaining and encouraging any home faith practices that may have taken root during this time. How can you continue to equip households to continue with faith practices in their homes as a new normal?
- If you are ready for small gatherings in your area consider encouraging a couple of households to gather in an outdoor space for a Bible study, devotion or a prayer service. Use the same packet or resource from zoom gatherings for small in-person gatherings. Have a small group watch the on-line resource.
- If you are ready to gather at the church, use outdoor spaces whenever possible. You might use a large fellowship hall to space out people appropriately. Children can be encouraged to stay in their own “bubble” using hula-hoops, sit-upons or other creative and visual spacings.
- Adults may return to traditional classroom spaces earlier than children. Consider continuing spacing out participants, not using communal Bibles or other materials and clean surfaces before and afterwards.
- When children and young people return to traditional classrooms consider beginning slowly with pared down furniture and helping children with their social distancing. Give children their own box of materials that is labeled with their name (include extras for visitors). Make washing hands before entering and when exiting part of the routine. Clean classrooms after each gathering.

Youth Groups, Small Groups and Intergenerational Gatherings

Our faith formation often happens in youth gatherings, small group ministry and other fellowship opportunities and events. These groups may have been gathering on-line and some may have been on hold. Connecting with our peer groups is important. Continuing intergenerational relationships is critical to our communities.

- If you had small groups such as “theology on tap” or other interest groups on hold during these times, consider beginning again with modifications. The favorite gathering space may still be closed but there could be an outdoor gathering with the same group. The relationships of these groups matter more than the shared activity.
- Fellowship and relationships are critical to faith formation. Your coffee hour, church BBQ’s, potlucks and other events may be cancelled for an undetermined timeframe. Pay attention to how you will continue opportunities for intergenerational relationships to be nurtured without these gatherings. Consider continuing a method of on-line mixers or outdoor gatherings where different people participate. Continue practices of interaction with older adults and others that are isolated at home for much longer than others.
- Your summer specific programming decisions are likely already altered. There are several on-line VBS curriculums to consider—most publishers are adjusting. Consider partnering with your camp and conference center that may be offering virtual camp.
- Many youth groups have been gathering on Zoom with games, devotions and check-ins. Some children or youth may be part of households that will have delayed re-entry plans. You may want to keep some sort of regular digital presence while you ease into gatherings. As mentioned with education classes, consider meeting outdoors or in large spaces. Have small gatherings of a few—perhaps someone has a fire-pit or a great outdoor space to be used. Consider a drive-in service with decorated cars and signs. Relationships matter and with screen fatigue it may be time for phone calls, snail mail or perhaps just drop by with a

goody bag. Be aware of continued stress as teenagers are built for peer interaction and may be having conflicts with their families.

Consider these questions:

- How can you equip parents and relieve some family stress? Are your young people growing weary of online gatherings? How are you handling your church guidelines for child protection policies in this new environment?

Nursery

Most of our nursery programs are not licensed during church activity, though they may share space with a licensed program. In either case, you might consider checking the state licensing guidelines and the health department to guide your decisions around cleaning, hygiene and best practices. Communicate early and often with families of small children about your plans.

- Consider delaying the staffing of a nursery area in the early stages of lifting restrictions
- If you do delay the opening of a staffed area, you could consider having the area open for parents that need to diaper change or nurse. Have guidelines for only one child/caregiver at a time and cleaning procedures.
- Consider moving rocking chairs and limited wipeable equipment pieces into the sanctuary for families.

Children in the Pews

If you are back in the sanctuary for worship, you may have decided not to have nursery or any other programming during worship. Great! This is an example of a new positive habit for your faith community. Young children may have been worshipping at home with their family in new and creative ways. It might be hard to come back to the sanctuary and sit still. Talk about how worship can continue to be inclusive of all and encourage church leadership to consider a new normal with some intergenerational worship practices.

- Make sure your pews have wipes and sanitizer accessible for all
- Pew activity bags should be pared down to items that can be disposed of or easily cleaned.
- If you had a “prayer-ground” or other activity centers in your sanctuary, consider moving those materials to crates at the end of a few pews. If you only have a few children in worship, you may have this area open, but someone should supervise the area. Clean every week.
- The Time for Children may need to be a time where all stay in their pews. Families should be highly encouraged to sit close to the front where their children can see. Put rocking chairs, prayer-grounds and packets near the front, not the back.

As you balance the health and safety of your community and tend to their spiritual growth, we hope that you will remain connected to the larger connectional church as new resources are released daily. The rest of this document includes some links for organizations to connect to and a modified list of resource links.

Christian Formation Collective: We partner with the following 5 organizations to support faith formation over a lifetime. These organizations are supporting faith formation leaders during this time in a variety of ways, hosting zoom support groups, worship and curating resources for leaders. They are on the front lines and we encourage you to connect to a network. Visit their websites, connect to their Facebook pages and discussion groups.

- [Association of Presbyterian Church Educators \(APCE\)](#)
- [Presbyterian Youth Workers Association \(PYWA\)](#)
- [Presbyterian Church Camp and Conference Association \(PCCCA\)](#)
- [UKirk Collegiate Ministries Association](#)
- [Presbyterian Older Adult Ministries Network \(POAMN\)](#)

The following Facebook groups offer resources and support that is ongoing and updated regularly:

- [PRC - Practical Resources for Churches](#)
- [Hope4CE \(faith formation/Christian education\)](#)
- [UKirk Leaders \(for collegiate ministries\)](#)
- [PYWA Discussion Group \(for youth workers\)](#)
- [Big Ideas for Youth Ministry](#)

Office of Christian Formation Resources (all ages and intergenerational)

Quicksheets have been created during these times for faith formation practices, youth, older adults and more. Check back on this page as more resources are added. pcusa.org/formation

Official Presbyterian Church, USA site; it will be updated often:

Coronavirus/COVID-19 Resources for Congregations and Members
https://www.pcusa.org/covid19/#_6._Responding_to

On-Going Resources for Worship and Faith Formation

- Presbyterian Publishing Corporation continues to support congregations with modifications for curriculum and help finding on-line studies. <https://www.pcusastore.com/Curriculum.aspx>
- Flyaway Children's Books that deal with emotions, religious themes and Biblical stories <https://www.flyawaybooks.com/>
- Theology and Worship in the Presbyterian Mission Agency has developed guides for worship, sacraments as well as having on-going faith formation studies such as Everyday GodTalk and daily readings. <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/theology-and-worship/>
- PCUSA Special Offerings develops curriculum for each of the offerings as well as a variety of other resources including a downloadable VBS. Curriculum can be used for all ages as well as during worship. <https://specialofferings.pcusa.org/resources/curriculum/>
- Presbyterian Mission Agency: Justice Unbound has online devotionals and other resources for young adults. <https://justiceunbound.org/>
- Theocademy produces high quality video lessons for all stages of faith formation. They do sell dvd's but some videos are available for free on their website <http://www.theocademy.com/> and youtube channel <https://www.youtube.com/user/Theocademy/videos>
- GenOn resources for intergenerational faith formation <https://www.genonministries.org/>
- Illustrated Ministries created weekly at-home activities during stay at home orders and now have a VBS. They also have a variety of resources for faith formation for all ages especially intergenerational resources. <https://store.illustratedministry.com/>
- Sanctified Art has worship and faith formation resources that focus on visual arts and creative liturgy. Many resources are intergenerational. <https://sanctifiedart.org/>
- Building Faith has resources, ideas, articles and more. <https://buildfaith.org/>
- Faith Alive offers reformed curriculum and resources <https://www.faihaliveresources.org/>
- Vibrant Faith Ministries offers webinars, trainings, coaching and more as you plan for faith formation <https://vibrantfaith.org/>

Visit pcusa.org/formation to learn more about the Office of Christian Formation