UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Missouri Mid-South Conference

"Then the Lord answered me and said: 'Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.'" Habakkuk 2:2

Suggested Guidelines for In-Person Worship and Ministry for MMS Churches

As of March 1, 2021

As we recognize the first anniversary of living through the Covid-19 pandemic, we continue to prayerfully sit with the question, "*When can we return to in-person worship and gatherings for our Church?"* Like the prophet Habakkuk, who envisioned God's voice providing clear vision and guidance, we seek to provide the same wisdom to you. Please know that the following are suggested guidelines only. We respect that each Church has ultimate authority of how you worship and gather together. We pray this information will provide foundational guidance for the way you plan, implement, and evaluate your in-person worship and ministry in 2021.

Two Statistics to Track in Your County:[1]

1. **Vaccination Rates**
   a. When more than 50% of the population has been vaccinated, we can expect that it will begin to have an impact on viral transmission (although "herd immunity" will not likely be fully reached until vaccination rates exceed 75%).
2. **Covid Cases and Positive Rates**
   a. It is safer to consider gathering when cases are less than 5 per 100,000 population and positive tests less than 10%. The safest time to gather would be when the cases and rates are even lower.

We recommend the following charts created by the Wisconsin Council of Churches when determining how and when to return to in-person worship and gatherings:

UNSAFE TO GATHER	MAKE IT SAFER	SAFEST
Vaccination rates <50%	Vaccination rates 50-70+%	Vaccination rates 70-85+%
Viral Transmission • Cases >10/100K • Positive Tests >10%	Viral Transmission • Cases 5-10/100K • Positive Tests<10%	Viral Transmission • Cases<1/100K • Positive Tests<5%

UNSAFE	MAKE IT SAFER	SAFEST
All at once Unmasked No distancing Full capacity Assembly singing Eating together	• Face masks mandatory • Physical distancing • Low-touch environment • Outdoors or increased air exchange • Shortened time of service • Singing by worship leaders only • Focus on sanitizing high-touch surfaces • Sign-in / attendance list	• All of the "make it safer" plus no or minimized singing • Hybrid, phased plan • Wait 1 month+ between phases • Fallback plan for outbreaks • Communication plan • Team responsibility

[1] https://www.wichurches.org/2021/01/14/returning-to-church/

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Three Actions We Recommend for this Stage of Ministry Through the Pandemic:

1. **Plan**
   - Contact your county's Department of Health to check on regular vaccination rate and covid case rate updates.
   - Develop a plan for when and how you will worship and gather for in-person and/or online ministry.
     - We encourage you to use the above model from the Wisconsin Council of Churches that provides **3 categories of in-person gatherings: Unsafe, Safer, Safest**.
   - Discuss the following areas of ministry for your in-person plan:
     - Children
       - Children under 18 will not be vaccinated until possibly 2022. Therefore, it is imperative that you keep the health and safety of your children as your upmost priority. See below for suggestions.
     - Cleaning areas of church building
       - Covid-19 is a highly infectious and transmittable disease. Research has shown that even if some have been vaccinated, they could transmit it to others who haven't been vaccinated. How will your church clean public areas before, during, and after in-person gatherings?
     - Public Singing
       - It is still not recommended to encourage public singing during the pandemic. Your leadership needs to discuss what you are comfortable in allowing at in-person gatherings. The unsafe model is singing without a mask; the safer model is singing with a mask; the safest model is not allowing public singing.
     - What happens if someone(s) who attended in-person church contracts Covid?
       - You need to discuss and plan whether you will pause in-person gatherings until everyone is notified and the church is cleaned and when you will return to in-person gatherings.
     - Special events where there may be more people in attendance
       - How will you handle an increase in attendance to a worship service or event inside the church building as well as outside?
     - How to handle people who do not wear masks or abide by the church's social-distance directives.
       - It is better to develop your response as Church leaders to so that if this happens, your Pastor and other leaders are supported when implementing your plan.
   - Develop a written In-Person Plan from the above discussion for staff, members, and volunteers.
     - Once the In-Person Plan is written, make it accessible to the church including what actions will be taken if it is not followed.
   - Educate
     - Encourage your members to be vaccinated as soon as possible.
     - Debunk any myths about the vaccines. Also, comfort those who are leery of medical professionals and/or the development of this vaccine so that more can be protected by the vaccinations.

2. **Implement**
    - Keep It Simple Siblings! ☺
        - You don't need to return 100% in-person with every meeting, gathering, fellowship, and event at your church. It's okay to identify two or three events as in-person and focus your time and energy to ensure they are done well.
    - Remember the Unsafe, Safer, and Safest model above and know that it is okay to make necessary adjustments for the health of the community.
    - Include Hybrid options
        - Make sure you have online options for physically vulnerable members. Make sure to include these options for meetings as well as worship.
    - Many of you began to implement your In-Person Plan last year when the weather allowed for outdoor gatherings. Lean into those experiences.

3. **Evaluate**
    - Evaluate what is working/not working and make necessary changes accordingly.
    - It's okay to pause in-person gatherings temporarily!
        - It is wiser to pause and regroup rather than continue with the possibility of doing more harm to physically vulnerable people.

The Importance of Children and Youth During This Phase of the Covid-19 Pandemic:[2]

At this time, we do not recommend nurseries for children or in-person children's Sunday School unless you can do so outside with appropriate health precautions and volunteer oversight. The following are verbatim guidelines from the Presbyterian Church (USA) that we support:

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 worshiping at home with their family in new and creative ways. It might be

[2] https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/remote-faith-formation-for-the-long-haul-with-guidelines-for-re-entry/

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.

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.
- 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?

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Final Words and Prayer…

As we provide this wealth of suggestions and resources, we pray that your Church will know that you are not alone in this moment of our ministry together. Just as God provided the prophet, Habakkuk during a critical moment in their journey, we are here to support you as well. May God, our Creator, guide you as you plan, implement, and evaluate your return to in-person worship and ministry.

Helpful Resources and Guidelines for Your Church's Consideration:

- CDC Considerations for Faith Communities
  - https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/faith-based.html
- UCC Insurance Board Re-Opening Resources
  - https://www.insuranceboard.org/reopening-training-videos/
- Children and Youth
  - https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/guidance-for-childcare.html#General
  - https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/remote-faith-formation-for-the-long-haul-with-guidelines-for-re-entry/
- Vaccination Resources
  - https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/fully-vaccinated.html
  - https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/toolkits/community-faith-based.html
- Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfecting Public Spaces
  - https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/reopen-guidance.html
- Considerations for Community-Based Organizations
  - https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/community-based.html
- Mental Health Resources
  - https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html