

**NEW YORK CONFERENCE
COVID-19 CHURCH RE-OPENING GUIDELINES
AS OF MAY 19, 2020¹**

In the shadow of our national emergency due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it is necessary to remember that wherever we are, and whatever manner in which we gather, we are the Body of Christ and the presence of The Divine continues to dwell in our midst. During this season, we pray for a spirit of discernment, for wisdom, and patience. We pray for researchers and medical professionals; for the planners; for the ill and recovering; for those grieving and struggling with the weightiness of these times. We pray for the watchers and wonderers, and all those who wait upon the Lord. May the Holy One, our Living Hope, Teacher and Resurrection Truth, guide your decisions.

We know that conversations have begun regarding the re-opening of church buildings and resuming in-person worship gatherings. It is our recommendation that no church should consider in-person gatherings prior to May 31st (Pentecost Sunday). Your NY Conference Ministry Team has consulted the CDC, state and local officials and church judicatories across the country and offer these guidelines in the spirit of covenant and love, the foundations upon which we base our relationship. We strongly urge our siblings across the Conference to prayerfully consider, then commit to the processes outlined below. The health of our neighbors and local church members depend on our ability to support and follow these guidelines.

It should be noted that there are no black and white answers, no “flip the switch” moment when we will be back to normal, nor a one-size-fits-all way to approach re-opening. There are best practices, common sense behaviors to take, and actions that are medically advisable, but no plan will fit every situation. A regional approach should be taken, distinguishing between urban and rural settings and among large, mid-size, and smaller congregations as leaders craft a plan that maintains health and wellness while allowing for services to resume. Be transparent and thoughtful, listen well and do not rush.

Per the Governor’s New York Forward Re-Opening Plan, state and local officials will monitor four core factors to determine if a region can reopen. These criteria are designed to allow phased re-openings to begin in each region only if:

- The infection rate is sufficiently low;
- The health care system has the capacity to absorb a potential resurgence in new cases;
- Diagnostic testing capacity is sufficiently high to detect and isolate new cases; and
- Robust contact-tracing capacity is in place to help prevent the spread of the virus.

¹ We anticipate that as our understanding of the COVID-19 virus evolves and as the impact of the pandemic changes in our communities, these Guidelines will be updated.

Under the Governor's Plan, industries across the state will reopen in four phases. Churches are not slated to reopen until Phase Four of the state-wide plan. The guidelines below should be viewed in light of the state-wide plan and are subject to change as the pandemic situation unfolds. The New York Forward Reopening Plan can be viewed at www.ny.gov. Be advised that, throughout the reopening process state and local authorities will continue to monitor adherence to regional reopening guidelines. For continued or egregious non-compliance, local law enforcement is empowered to enforce the rules.

Initial Re-opening Considerations

Church leadership should begin with conversation that reviews your current shut-down situation. What have you learned about your church and its mission? What shut-down practices will you continue? What things will need to be different?

Begin working to create a good reopening process. Make sure that all viewpoints are heard and considered. Make sure that the interests of all the people of the church are taken into consideration, especially those who are the most vulnerable. Focus on the health and safety of congregants first. Gather facts and information from reliable and expert sources e.g. CDC, ny.gov., local health departments, etc. to determine when it will be safest to re-open. Up to date monitoring for each state region can be found at ny.gov/nyforward.

Every congregation should take a practical, hard, introspective look at what their abilities are and who their congregation is: assess the physical space and lay-out of the building and what percentage of the congregation and staff fall into medical at-risk categories. Know your demographics! Churches should not reopen until they have a clear picture of who they are and have assessed their preparedness. These questions may be helpful for this assessment:

- a. How many members attend vs. how much square footage is in the meeting space?
- b. What number of attendees can be accommodated given the square footage of your space? For example, if your sanctuary has 3000 square feet, then you can accommodate UP TO 83 people. Each person needs to be 6 feet away from each other person in each direction. This is a square space of 6 ft by 6 ft which is 36 square feet. Therefore, each person needs 36 square feet ($6 \times 6 = 36$). If each person needs 36 square feet, the $3000 \text{ sq ft} / 36 \text{ sq ft} = 83.33$.
- c. How will you determine who the limited number of attendees will be?
- d. When in earlier phases of relaunch, how will you cap attendance at events so there is room for members of the community to join you and so you don't go over guidelines?
- e. Do you have the capacity for ongoing cleaning and sanitization of your facilities?
- f. Consider how the church will handle the backlog of funerals and memorial services when we can regather. How will the church honor those who have died - and support those who have lost loved ones?

- g. How will you update your building use agreements to reflect the new realities of COVID-19?

RE-OPENING STEPS RECOMMENDATIONS

The CDC recommends that before implementing reopening steps a county must experience a 14-day decline in hospitalizations and deaths on a 3-day rolling average. Counties with few COVID cases cannot exceed 15 new total cases or 5 new deaths on a 3-day rolling average. A county must have fewer than two new COVID patients admitted per 100,000 residents per day.

Please note that these steps may not be linear in nature. Given the fact that the CDC anticipates a second wave of COVID-19 infections, your Church leadership should be prepared for an increase in infections at which point, it is recommended that you close your church building for a 14-day monitoring period before returning to Step 1 and following the protocol accordingly.

Your Region/County must be declared as being in Phase Four of the NEW YORK FORWARD re-opening plan before a congregation is to start with STEP ONE below.

RE-OPENING PHASE FOUR - STEP ONE:

- In person is worship limited to 10-15 while maintaining 6 ft between individuals in each direction. (Your sanctuary must be at least 540 square feet).
- Masks MUST be worn by everyone entering the building.
- Continue online worship recording.
- No congregational singing.
- No choir singing.
- No Time with the Children (where children come forward). If the leader can speak to children while they remain safely with their family, this version of a Time with the Children is acceptable.
- No Nursery provided
- No Passing the Peace (Consider alternatives. See below)
- Alternative method for offering collection. Encourage online giving.
- No Fellowship Hour
- Alternative method for Communion
- Bible Studies/Board/Committee meetings continue online
- Church Office remains closed.

RE-OPENING PHASE FOUR - STEP TWO:

CRITERIA: No less than 1 month after implementing Step 1.

- In-person worship limited to 30-35, if your sanctuary square footage allows for this, while maintaining 6 ft between individuals in each direction. Therefore, your sanctuary must have at least 1260 square feet.
- Masks MUST be worn by everyone entering the building.
- Continue online worship recording.
- No congregational singing. Consider small (2-3 person) masked ensemble maintaining 6ft between singers
- No Time with the Children (where children come forward) If the leader can speak to children while they remain safely with their family, this version of a Time with the Children is acceptable.
- No Nursery provided.
- No Passing the Peace (Consider alternatives. See below.)
- Alternative method for offering collection. Encourage online giving.
- No Fellowship Hour
- Alternative method for Communion
- Church councils and leadership teams of less than 10 might consider meeting in person while wearing masks and maintaining social distancing or continue meeting online.
- Church office open staggering when staff is present. Masks must be worn if others are present.
- Rental Use of building for small (less than 20) masked occupants.

RE-OPENING PHASE FOUR – STEP THREE

CRITERIA: No less than 1 month after implementing Step 2

- In-person worship limited to 50, if your sanctuary square footage allows for this, while maintaining 6 ft between individuals in each direction. Therefore, your sanctuary must have at least 1800 square feet.
- Masks MUST be worn by everyone entering the building.
- Continue online worship/ recording.
- Masked choir or small ensemble singing.
- No congregational singing.
- Children's time, if social distancing requirements can be maintained.
- No Nursery provided
- No Passing the Peace (Consider alternatives. See below.)
- Alternative method for offering collection. Encourage online giving.
- No Fellowship Hour
- Alternative method for Communion

- Office open with masked staff, while maintaining social distancing
- Board meetings with masked attendees and maintaining social distancing.
- Building rental use for up to 50 masked occupants.

RE-OPENING PHASE FOUR – STEP FOUR

We are NOT prepared at this point to recommend a time to return to Pre-COVID Worship Practices. We will assess the progress toward testing and development of a vaccine later in the summer. We DO recommend that churches that have incorporated live-streaming or online recording of worship services make this a permanent practice.

During All Re-Opening Steps

Common sense best practices are vital (e.g. hand washing, wearing masks, maintaining physical distance). It should also be understood that even these commonsense approaches will not and cannot prevent all spread of infection.

- Establish and continue communication with local and state authorities to determine current mitigation levels in your community.
- Protect staff and congregants who are at higher risk for severe illness encouraging use of options to participate virtually, if possible.
- Continue to provide congregants with spiritual and emotional care and counseling on a virtual basis or refer them to other available resources.

Facility & Healthy Hygiene Practices

- Have adequate supplies to support healthy hygiene behaviors, including soap, hand sanitizer with at least 60 percent alcohol, tissues, and no-touch trash cans. Hand sanitizer and cleaning wipes should be available throughout the building.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces at least daily and shared objects between use. This would include weekly cleanings and cleaning after meetings (Step 2) or building use (Steps 2 & 3)
- If holding multiple services, cleaning should be conducted after each service.
- Ensure that ventilation systems operate properly and increase circulation of outdoor air as much as possible by opening windows and doors,
- Take steps to ensure that all water systems and features (for example, drinking fountains, decorative fountains) are safe to use after a prolonged facility shutdown to minimize the risk of Legionnaires' disease and other diseases associated with water.
- Tight spaces like copier areas, kitchenettes, bathrooms and elevators should all be treated as 1 in, 1 out when possible. Provide sanitizing wipes for any shared equipment or common areas
- Close off all rooms not needed for worship such as Sunday School rooms, nursery, kitchens, closets.

Worship:

- Face masks are required of all in-person worship attendees. Consider having face masks available for worshippers.
- Space out seating for attendees who do not live in the same household to at least six feet apart when possible; consider limiting seating to alternate rows.
- For larger congregations, whose sanctuary size cannot accommodate the incremental increases in attendees and still maintain 6ft distancing, consider holding multiple staggered worship services to limit of attendees. Allow time for people from the first service to leave so that you can fully clean worship space before allowing worship attendees of next service to enter.
- Consider collecting and storing all hymnals, Bibles, prayer books, etc., to minimize communal use.
- Bulletin use is discouraged. Even if they are in a stack, folks will need to touch them to grab one, and who wants to be the next person or the last person to touch the bulletins? If used, bulletins should not be passed from usher to congregant, but allow congregants to retrieve their own bulletin. Consider projecting liturgy, prayers, etc., by electronic means. Or email liturgy to congregants' homes and have them bring their own printed copy to worship.
- The CDC identifies singing as a high-risk action during this pandemic. Therefore, we recommend that singing be limited to soloist or duets.
- When using microphones, one microphone should be assigned to each worship participant (pastor, liturgist, soloist) per service. If this not possible, the microphone should be wiped down with cleaning wipes after each person speaks. All microphones should be wiped down at the conclusion of the service.
- Offering plates should NOT be passed. Encourage online giving, mail or a stationary collection box to receive weekly offerings.
- No more than two (2) gloved, masked individuals should be involved in counting offerings.
- No Nursery during worship until a COVID-19 vaccine has been developed.
- Instead of Passing the Peace, allow a moment for congregants to wave at one another, or as a congregation, learn "The Peace of Christ" in American Sign Language. Avoid moving around the sanctuary to greet one another.
- Ushers should maintain social distancing.
- Consider having one usher to operate the outside and the sanctuary doors to limit communal touching of door handles. Usher should continue social distancing when operating doors for congregants. Door handles should be disinfected after each use of the building.

SACRAMENTS:

- Administering Communion safely will continue to be a challenge, as touching a face mask (to remove or shift it) contaminates it. Further proximity to the communicant is a risk to the communion minister and those receiving. Some alternatives are:
 - Performing the communion liturgy in worship and having congregants pick up individualized communion sets as they leave to be consumed at a later time.
 - Provide congregants with individualized communion sets as they depart and hold a special online communion service at designated time.
 - In lieu of distributing individual communion sets, have congregants prepare elements at home and hold a special online communion service at a designated time.
- Baptisms are discouraged during this pandemic. If there is a particular urgency to the request, an alternative might be for the minister to perform the baptism liturgy and allow the parents to sprinkle/pour the water.

Spiritual Formation

- Until Step 3 offer opportunities for Bible studies, Confirmation class and small groups to meet in online.
- We recommend against offering Vacation Bible School in person. Consider an online gathering or mailing VBS workbook or craft activities to students' homes.
- We recommend that camps not be in session this summer.

Should a Congregant Become Sick

If someone contracts COVID-19, determine how to communicate with the congregants who may have come into contact with that individual while maintaining privacy and pastoral care. In the event a person diagnosed with COVID-19 is determined to have been in the building and poses a risk to the community, it is strongly suggested that your building close for 14-days. All those who came into contact with the infected individual should monitor and self-quarantine. The areas of the church building where the individual was present should be properly cleaned and disinfected. After 14 days, the church should return to Step One.

Prayer for Reopening

Creator God, we pray that your wisdom would guide us in how and when to reopen our Churches. May this Phased Reopening Plan provide a starting place for consideration for all ministers and Church leaders in this time during the pandemic. In your healing love we pray, Amen.

REFERENCES:

New York State Governor's Office

www.ny.org

Center for Disease Control

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>

Wisconsin Council of Churches resource

<https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/>

United Church of Christ resource on reopening

https://www.ucc.org/daily_covid_19_brief_issue_26

Missouri Mid-South Conference previous guidelines

<https://www.missourimidsouth.org/covid19>

“Opening Up America Again,” U.S. Federal Guidelines released April 16, 2020.

“The Presbyteries of Grand Canon & de Cristo”, April 29, 2020

SUGGESTED IN-PERSON REOPENING STEPS

<u>Action</u>	<u>Step One</u>	<u>Step Two</u>	<u>Step Three</u>
	<i>14 day declining COVID cases</i>	<i>No less than one month after Step 1</i>	<i>No less than one month after Step 2</i>
In-Person Worship	YES 10 max	YES 15 max	YES 30 max
6 Ft Social Distancing	YES	YES	YES
Face Masks	YES	YES	YES
Singing	NO	Solo /Small (2-3) Ensemble	Masked Choir
Passing of Peace	NO	NO	NO
Time with Children	NO	NO	Limited
Passing Offering Plates	NO	NO	NO
Communion	NO	NO	NO
Hymnals/Pew Bibles	NO	NO	NO
Nursery	NO	NO	NO
Bulletins	Not Recommended	YES Limited Contact 1- Time Use	YES Limited Contact 1- Time Use
Fellowship Before/After	NO	NO	NO
Sunday School / Bible Study/ Confirmation	Online Only	Online Only	Limited
Committee Meetings	NO	YES 10 max	YES
Church Office Open	NO	Staggered Staffing	YES

If during any Step there is an increase in COVID-19 cases in your region, it is recommended your church return to Step One.

If a member of your church is diagnosed with COVID-19 and was present in worship during any of the above steps, we recommend you stop worship services, wait two weeks, and then return to Step One.