

Benchmarks and Protocols for Reopening Churches during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Phase I

Presbytery of Lake Huron

April 27, 2020

Disclaimer: The following constitutes ecclesiastical counsel to sessions and pastoral leaders of the Presbytery of Lake Huron. It is not a substitute for professional medical or legal advice.

The decision as to when and how to reopen our congregations to in-person meetings and public worship is a decision of each church session for its own congregation. It is our expectation that in making those decisions, sessions will observe all local, state, and national public health directives. We also ask that you heed the advice of the Presbytery in this document and other communications.

As Jesus taught, the two greatest commandments – to love God and to love our neighbor – are inseparable. We read in the First Epistle of John: “The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also” (1 John 4:21). Let us therefore act responsibly and caringly towards our neighbors – especially the most vulnerable – as we offer our praise and worship to God together.

The benchmarks for whether to reopen public worship depend on numerous factors. The Harvard study on phased response to Covid-19¹ says that absent a coordinated nationwide response effort to provide massive testing and tracing, and enforced social isolation, we can expect some form of social distancing for 12-18 months (until a critical mass of infection and vaccination is reached). Even then, the impact of the pandemic may have lasting effects on expectations and behaviors. We need to be prepared for the long-haul.

This advice includes protocols adapted from guidance from the Wisconsin Council of Churches, developed in consultation with religious leaders, insurance representatives, and public health officials. The states of Wisconsin and Michigan are among seven midwestern states coordinating timelines and benchmarks for reopening public activity. Only protocols for the first phase of reopening are included here. Churches should consult the full advice before beginning public worship services (see link in footnote).

Additional information including a series of additional questions and accompanying guidance, as well as guidance from a panel of medical, religious, and insurance leaders may be found on the Coronavirus response page of the presbytery website: www.presbylh.org.

¹ *Roadmap to Pandemic Resilience: Massive Scale Testing, Tracing, and Supported Isolation (TTSI) as the Path to Pandemic Resilience for a Free Society* https://ethics.harvard.edu/files/center-for-ethics/files/roadmaptopandemicresilience_updated_4.20.20_0.pdf

A Model for Returning to Church²

SAFER AT HOME (Our present situation)

See our document [Preparing for Safer at Home](#) for detailed recommendations on how churches should respond. We recommend the following baseline practices:

- Churches holding online worship services only. We recommend recording from home.
- Bible studies, small groups, etc. should be meeting online.
- Service ministries are using safety protocols and only addressing essential needs.
- Minimal, drop-in staffing sufficient for essential operations (deposits, mail processing, etc).

PHASE ONE (Presently set to commence May 15 in Michigan; May 31 for Presbytery of Lake Huron congregations)

Phase One begins when all gating Criteria and Core Responsibilities are met. In brief, look for two weeks of declining case counts, widespread availability of testing, contact tracing and no PPE shortages.

What we recommend:

- Churches should continue holding online worship services only.
- Consider resuming recording in the sanctuary, while maintaining at least 6 ft of space between people – greater distance between those who are singing.
- Life rituals (weddings, funerals) should be kept to less than 10 in attendance. If you need to help set a limit, consider using immediate family. We advise only publicizing the date and location to those who are on the approved list to prevent hurt feelings or awkward situations. See our [Guide to Funerals During COVID-19](#) for additional resources.
- Bible studies and small groups continue to meet online.
- Keep office functions as limited as possible to ensure essential operations. Those in the office should be wearing masks; if you have more than one person in the office, make sure that surfaces, including the phone, are regularly sanitized.
- Consider allowing building users/renters back in (music lessons, etc.) if they are able to observe gathering limits and distancing protocols, and you are able to accommodate the cleaning needs.

² Adapted from Wisconsin Council of Churches, “Returning to Church: A Model for Ministry during the COVID-19 Outbreak”. <https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/> accessed April 27, 2020.

- 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.
- High risk individuals (people over 60 and those with underlying conditions), whether staff or volunteers, should continue to shelter in place.

Questions for Church Leadership to Consider

We offer this list of questions for the church Council/Vestry/Session/Consistory and Committees to consider in consultation with their clergy. We recommend that you work through these questions before re-launch:

- Has your insurance company weighed in on benchmarks for reopening, and for operating any programs? Your judicatory leader (Bishop, Presbyterian, Conference Minister or other authority)? How will these influence your decision?
- Will you maintain an online streaming option once you are back together worshipping in physical space? How will that need to adjust when there is also in-person worship happening?
- How many people can your worship space hold if you are worshipping in family groups sitting 6 feet apart?
- How will you discourage the receiving line after church and/or congregating after worship services?
- 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?
- How can you encourage small group gatherings with the building of small group, discipleship systems, etc. in the earlier phases of relaunching – possibly even before we move from Safer at Home into Phase One? How might you continue these when in-person worship resumes?
- How will you ensure sanitation and disinfection regarding communal spaces?
 - Worship bulletin disposal, prayer books, etc.
 - Areas where small groups gather during the week
 - Nurseries and/or playgrounds
 - Pews or chairs following worship
 - Doorknobs, bathrooms, other areas that people touch when in your building

- How will you update your building use agreements to reflect the new realities of COVID-19?
- If someone contracts COVID-19, how will you communicate with your congregation and members who may have come into contact with that individual while maintaining privacy and pastoral care?
- If someone who has been in your building contracts COVID-19, how will you do a more intensive cleaning prior to its next use?
- How will you communicate your safety plan and best practices to the congregation?