

NEW SUPPLEMENTAL GUIDANCE FOR CHURCHES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
From the Presbytery Council of the Presbytery of Lake Huron
July 15, 2020

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Called to a Different Way: While we look to health professionals and experts to give sound and reasoned advice, as Christians we also have another set of guidelines to help chart our way through these uncertain and quickly changing times. Scripture and Jesus' own incarnation, life, death, and resurrection provide the model for our faithful discipleship. Accordingly, we must ask, how would Jesus suggest we best "love our neighbor?" Would Jesus wear a mask while shopping downtown? Would he bristle at being uncomfortable or inconvenienced? Would he insist on his own rights or mock those who were frightened for their lives? How do we follow Christ's words to "lay down our lives for one another?" As your Sessions discern with the Holy Spirit how to live out Christ's call in your particular community, we hope that the following will provide additional guidance and help.

New Michigan Executive Orders: It has been over a month since the Presbytery Council last updated our guidance to congregations. While our state has been among the most successful in battling the pandemic, recent infection rates have increased to record levels both nationally and in parts of Michigan, suggesting that the battle is far from over. While we long for the day when we can return to our normal practice of worship and ministry, it is important that we continue to protect the most vulnerable in our churches and communities.

On July 9 and 10, Governor Whitmer issued new orders governing [workplace safety](#) and [wearing of masks](#) in public. It is important to note that churches are **not exempted from these requirements for daily business**. (Use of masks during public worship in a church, while exempt, is still strongly encouraged.)

Among the requirements placed on all business offices (which includes church offices):

- Continue to encourage work-from-home if possible
- Prepare and display an occupational safety plan, and train employees regarding procedures
- Provide masks and disinfection supplies for employees for office use
- Prohibit non-essential visitors
- Require face coverings in all shared spaces
- Adopt a response plan for a confirmed employee infection, including disinfection protocols
- Restrict non-essential travel, including in-person conferences and meetings
- Require face coverings in crowded outdoor spaces and in all indoor public spaces
- Refuse entry or service to people who refuse to wear a face covering, with limited exceptions.

Church Worship Services: In the newest executive order on masks, the requirement to wear a face covering doesn't apply to individuals who are officiating at a religious service or are giving a speech for broadcast or an audience, but the CDC still recommends wearing masks during these types of activities.

Presbytery Council wants to reiterate our previous advice, that while churches are not subject to penalty for violating state restrictions on public gatherings, we should nevertheless abide by them as good neighbors for the sake of the health of our members and communities. This includes limiting indoor public gatherings (such as worship) to no more than 10 socially distanced persons, and outdoor gatherings to no more than 100 personsⁱ.

If Sessions nevertheless decide to hold gatherings of more than 10 persons, they should still abide by the state guidance for cinemas and other public venues (section 12 of [Order 2020-145](#)), as well as the advice posted on our [COVID-19 resource page](#). Accommodation should be made to include those who for reasons of health or

conscience choose not to be present. Sessions should also adopt criteria and a process for re-closing gatherings if conditions worsen.

Presbytery Office and Staff: In keeping with these requirements, the Presbytery Office will continue to be closed for regular business, with employees working remotely as much as possible. All meetings will continue to be conducted online (via Zoom or other platform) until further notice. In addition, all non-essential travel by Presbytery employees is restricted, including participation in public worship that does not conform to the state executive orders for public gatherings.

New Avenues for Sharing Christ: We have been heartened to hear from pastors and elders across the Presbytery about the creative ways that your congregations are supporting each other, ministering to your community, and sharing the Gospel in new ways. Our churches are sharing their recorded services online and reaching wider audiences. Our churches are meeting outdoors or trying drive-in worship services. Our churches are finding new partners in ministry and outreach beyond the church walls and further into their community. We pray for your ministries to flourish.

Financial Challenges: The recent months have also brought challenges that can affect the financial state of our churches--not being able to safely worship together, furloughs and layoffs, and the immense amount of need in our communities, to name only a few. To assist congregations facing special financial hardship, the Presbytery is extending the deadline for "COVID-19 assistance grants and loans" through September 15. Cumulative grant and loan amounts will be increased to \$6,000 each. Loans will continue to be issued at no interest, with no payments for six months, and a 20-month repayment schedule. [Applications](#) are available on the Presbytery website.

Technology Grants: Several congregations have expressed the desire to continue providing for worship online until their members are comfortable meeting in person again. Others seek to expand their capacity to blend their online platforms with in-person gatherings. The Presbytery has created "Congregational Transformation Grants" of up to \$2500 to aid churches in developing online worship capacity through new technology, training, and other means. [Applications](#) are available on our website.

In Christ's Fellowship,

The Presbytery Council

ⁱ This applies to all churches of the Presbytery except Houghton Lake which is in MERC region 6 and is permitted to have up to 50 socially-distanced persons indoors and up to 250 outdoors.