



Guidelines for Incremental Reopening of Congregational In-Person Gathering Suggested by the Mississippi United Methodist Conference

While Bishop Swanson has requested churches not reopen until after May 31, the following guidelines will not be equally applicable to all local churches. In using these guidelines to navigate your local church's reopening process, acknowledge what role your congregation's membership size, demographics, surrounding community and other ministry contexts may play in your adaptation of these recommendations. Know your context and know your risk factors involved with your facility layout. Know the risk factors involved with the congregation you serve including the percentage of vulnerable attendees and how this affects your plans to reopen. One thing that should be considered in all local churches no matter what size or ministry context, is to make sure to involve lay leadership as this is not solely a clergy decision. For all activities, be aware of and honor recommendations by local, state and federal health agencies regarding social distancing and other protective measures for the congregation. Don't just see these guidelines as a how-to reopen manual. Consider implementing the following recommendations into an overall plan of moving forward in effective disciple-making ministry, regardless of reopening date.

Congregational Care and the Coronavirus

Guidelines Phases

The following phases are based on the White House guidelines from [Opening Up American Again](#), a three-phased approach based on the advice of public health experts. Continue to adhere to [state](#) and local guidance as well as complementary CDC guidance, particularly with respect to face coverings.

Phase One: All vulnerable individuals should continue to shelter in place. All individuals, when in public should maximize physical distance from others. Please do not gather in groups of more than 10 people in circumstances that do not readily allow for appropriate physical distancing. Schools and organized youth activities (i.e. daycare, camp) that are currently closed should remain closed. Visits to senior living facilities and hospitals should be prohibited. Minimize non-essential travel and adhere to CDC guidelines regarding isolation following travel.

Phase Two: *This phase will be in affect when states and regions have no evidence of a rebound and satisfy the gating criteria twice.* All vulnerable individuals should continue to shelter in place. All individuals, when in public should maximize physical distance from others. Social setting of more than 50 people, where appropriate distancing may not be practical, should be avoided unless precautionary measures are observed. Schools and organized youth activities (e.g., daycare, camp) can reopen. Visits to senior care facilities and hospitals should be prohibited. Non-essential travel can resume.

Phase Three: *This phase will be in affect with states and regions that have no evidence of a rebound and satisfy the gating criteria a third time.* Vulnerable individuals can resume public interactions but should practice physical distancing and minimizing exposure to social settings where distancing may not be practical, unless precautionary measures are observed. Resume unrestricted staffing of worksites. Visits to senior care facilities and hospitals can resume. Those who interact with residents and patients must be diligent regarding hygiene. Large venues (e.g., sit-down dining, movie theaters, sporting venues, places of worship) can operate under limited physical distancing protocols.

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Communication

- **Internal Communications:** Communication with internal audiences (i.e. staff, leadership, volunteers, ministry partners, etc.) is essential for retaining the trust and support of church members. Strongly consider personally communicating (i.e. Zoom video conferencing or a phone call rather than an email or text) with this group.
- **External Communications:** Make sure that the message you communicate with external audiences (i.e. church members not in leadership, surrounding community, regional media, social media, etc.) is relevant to the people you are trying to reach. Different audiences with different concerns may require different messages. Also consider the best communication vehicles for each audience.

Worship

Consider reimagining the order and length of worship service, and in that consideration recognize that additional time may be needed to practice social distancing with the offering and entering and exiting the sanctuary, fellowship hall, etc.

All individuals who are displaying symptoms should stay home and commit to social distancing for the prescribed duration. Plans to accommodate gatherings depending upon average worship attendance.

10 or less | 11 to 50 | 51 to 100 | more than 100

Collaborators: pastor, lay leader, administrative council chair, trustee chair, pastor/parish relations committee chair, worship leaders and participants, financial secretary (as applicable in individual churches), greeters and ushers

Guidelines: Know the risk factors, consult and honor CDC/State Department of Health guidelines/county health department guidelines. Maintain social distancing, enforced between families in residence together. No passing of the peace, no handshaking (smile and wave only). Continue online if possible. When meeting, have usher to monitor the parking lot. Ushers wear masks and gloves. Consider seating arrangements inside church.

- **Prioritizing Reopening with Limited Activities** (i.e. worship, childcare, mid-week Wednesday night services and Bible studies)
 - **Collaborators:** lay leader, pastor, church council chair, paid staff and volunteers, youth and children's ministry leaders, caterers (takeout only)
 - **Guidelines:** Gather collaborators electronically for discernment of highest priorities in their context, answer the following questions:
 - Why do we exist (mission)?
 - What matters most to us (values)?
 - What is unique about our church (context)?
 - What is God's audacious vision for us at this time (vision)?
 - How do we go about doing ministry in light of these answers (strategies)?
 - Create a six-month calendar to plan when to start each of these ministries with gradual implementation
- **Sacraments**
 - **Collaborators:** pastor, worship leader, lay leader, communion stewards, ushers
 - **Guidelines:** Review the risk factors in your context. **Phase One and Two:** During Communion, utilize disposable packets, absolutely no intinction, no cups in tray, server should be gloved and masked. If you are gathering in the parking lot, pastor should wear gloves and mask and distribute disposable packets. During Baptisms, use separate water

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for baptizing each individual. Social distancing observed throughout ritual (including presentation of infant). Consider pouring water over child/person to be baptized.

- **Music Ministry**

- **Collaborators:** pastor, musicians, lay leader, choir president/officers, music ministry participants, choir director
- **Guidelines:**
 - **Phase One:** Suspend if social distancing cannot be observed, decrease number of members to participate at one time. Consider using only recorded music in the beginning.
 - **Phase Two:** Name a parliamentarian to enforce social distancing. Sanitize microphones, stands. No passing of microphones. Increase solos or small ensemble (two or three).

- **Tithes and Offerings**

- **Collaborators:** pastor, finance committee chair, treasurer, financial secretary
- **Guidelines:** Place offering plates/baskets at entrance or exit areas. If drive-in services are held, use a bucket. Consider counting procedures carefully. [Click here](#) for guidance.

- **Worship, Entry and Exit Contact** (including parking lots, narthexes and other gathering spaces, as well as hand holding rituals and passing the peace)

- **Collaborators:** greeters, ushers, worship leader, parking lot attendants, trustees, health initiative team/medical professional in membership
- **Guidelines: Phase One and Two**
 - Allow sequential dismissal – row one, then row two, etc. **No** mass exodus.
 - Continue social distancing as you enter and exit. Use social distancing guidelines for spacing worship seating. Allow senior citizens to leave first.

- **Ushers, Greeters and Volunteers** (clear expectations and doing ministry differently)

- **Collaborators:** volunteers, ushers, greeters, worship leader, parking lot attendants, trustees, health initiative team/medical professional in membership
- **Guidelines: Phase One and Two** Greeters/ushers will enforce social distancing and instruct visitors how to enter and exit. You need greeters who like people and don't mind speaking up. "I am so sorry; I need you to move here." Assign a greeter/usher to call the police and/or 911 should something emerge – health-related, etc. **Volunteers: Until all social distancing is lifted in Phase Three** - Give people permission to step away from their responsibility. "Because I am part of a vulnerable population, I need to step away." Give permission for volunteers to step aside for a season. Have someone that can step into this position. Apprentice this role and be intentional about molding the person. Provide temperature checks for every volunteer when they come on duty and when they leave to ensure they do not have a temperature spike. Consider having restroom attendants, and if possible, have separate restroom for those belonging to a highly vulnerable population.

Small Groups

- **Bible Study and Sunday School** (consider size and numbers gathering, space and curriculum)

- **Collaborators:** clergy, lay leader, Sunday school superintendent, Sunday school teachers, parents, age level coordinators

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- **Guidelines:** Utilize technology. Consider expanding meeting times beyond Sundays to reach new people and include others. Digital curriculum should be a priority for access, but if you do utilize printed material find a central location for pickup to prevent groups coming into the building for sanitation purposes. **Phase One:** Consider holding off in-person Sunday school gathering until restrictions are lifted to at least 10 to 50 people in your phase of reopening.
 - **Children and Youth Ministry**
 - **Collaborators:** children's director, pastor, volunteers, person who helps oversee safe sanctuary guidelines, trustees, health initiative team/medical professional in membership
 - **Guidelines: Phase One and Two** Establish re-entry into phases. Break down into groups of 10 and have an adult journey with them. Identify any underlying health conditions of children (asthma, etc.). Use dividers to keep children and youth six feet apart, especially during activities (Ex: voting dividers). Youth groups should consider reallocating smaller numbers to small groups, for example, one adult leader for every eight kids. They are establishing a relationship of what they have been doing online. Plan when they gather, who are their people, where will they go. Think about gathering limitations and establish expectations before gathering back. You may not be able to have everybody together at one time. **Phase Two:** If possible, have children and/or youth meet in small groups outside. This will have less germs and more spacing. Ask parents to RSVP for students to minimize chances that the small group becomes larger than expected due to unexpected visitors. Have two adult leaders for each small group in the event that an overflow group has to be created on the spot. Let students play video screen or distance games. All contact sports and interactive games should be **prohibited** until we enter **Phase Three** where all social distancing mandates have been lifted.
 - **Vacation Bible School**
 - **Collaborators:** pastor, VBS director, children's ministry leaders, parents
 - **Guidelines:** Cancel in-person gathering for summer 2020. Use online options.
- Pastoral Engagement (Pastoring Your Physical Flock, Digital Flock and Community)**
- **Connecting with Online Attendees**
 - **Collaborators:** lay leader, pastor, evangelism chair, mission chair, administrative board chair, age level coordinators, discipleship chair
 - **Guidelines:** Intentionally compile a list of those who commented online and reach out to them; provide a feedback loop (website, giving opportunity, prayer list, phone number, etc.). Be intentional about reaching the unchurched and when you follow up don't just ask them to come to church - ask them how you can be supportive to them, reimagine who you are preaching to and recreate contact points through the week (maximum of two-minute messages specifically for online congregation). Move from viewership numbers to real relationships.
 - **Self-Care Resources**
 - **Collaborators:** lay leader, pastor, local mental health professionals, church members in the mental health field, social workers who deal with at-risk children, school counselors, community mental health agencies
 - **Guidelines:** Compile a list of mental health resources, domestic violence hotlines, law enforcement information, local mental health agencies and marital counselors available for referral.



- **Continuing Digital Discipleship**

- **Collaborators:** lay leader, pastor, tech volunteers or staff, financial resources for equipment purchases and software
- **Guidelines:** Communicate with the congregation the vision to expand digital and online worship, recruit new volunteers (even unchurched people who have those gifts), aim for good production quality and reimagine order of worship that is most conducive to online viewership.

Stewardship

- **Finances**

- **Prioritizing Ministry Aligned with Financial Reality** (stopping, starting, repurposing staff and volunteers/disciples)
 - **Collaborators:** lay leaders, pastor, treasurer, finance committee, staff/pastor parish relations committee
 - **Guidelines:** preparation and implementation of stewardship program now and for 2021, answer the following questions: why do we exist (mission)? What matters most to us (values)? What is unique about our church (context)? What is God's audacious vision for us at this time (vision)? How do we go about doing ministry in light of these answers (strategies)? Extend gratitude to donors and contributors. **Medium and large congregations:** S/PPRC and staff should reassess job descriptions and consider cross-purposing staff for ministries.

- **Sanitizing the Facilities**

- **Collaborators:** pastor, trustee chair/committee, finance, custodial staff
- **Guidelines: Phase One and Two** Clean in accordance with CDC and Mississippi State Department of Health guidelines. Deep cleaning prior to return to in-person gatherings (doorways, nursery, restrooms, light switches, etc.). You should strive to remove all material that could be used by more than one person that might spread infection such as hymnals, pew Bibles, bulletin materials and offering plates being passed. Sterilize between times of worship. For pastors that travel between churches, disinfect yourself and any items you carry into the next church.

Special Events (Funerals, Revivals, Etc.)

- **Collaborators:** funeral director, flower guild/shops, congregational care committee, ushers, greeters, trustees, health initiative team/medical professional in membership
- **Guidelines: Phase Two**
 - Use screens rather than hymnals/bulletins.
 - Pass out sanitizer.
 - Sanitize before and after any gathering. Sanitize as you go in, sanitize as you go out.
 - Utilize Low Power FM Transmitter headset for graveside and drive-up committal.
 - Greeters should be posted inside and outside maintaining six feet of distancing. Greeters count people as they go in as well.
 - **FOR FUNERALS:** Households sit together with six feet apart from others in sanctuary.
 - **FOR FUNERALS:** Visitation - utilize zoom; drive by visitation - visitation team will call ahead and park in driveway and do a drive-by visitation or call members on phone and have them look outside. This is also known as a drive-by shout out. Text, email or Zoom prayer requests. The person can go pray for persons in their driveway.
 - Creation of ritual to help celebrate and lament the loss of loved ones. We do a great job on All Saints Sunday. How can we be intentional when the community of faith gathers to recognize the loss of loved ones?



Coffee Stations and Meals

Phase Three: *We DO NOT recommend meals or coffee stations until Phase Three - when all COVID-19 and social distancing restrictions by state, local and health authorities have been lifted.

- **Collaborators:** volunteers, hospitality teams, health initiative team/ medical professional in membership
- **Guidelines:**
 - Where was it prepared?
 - How was it prepared?
 - Define proper use of gloves, masks when touching cups, etc.
- Consider home church gatherings.
- No potlucks until vaccination is found!
- How does church break into satellites to gather and worship? Classes, society and bands.

Vital Signs and Insights

- **Collaborators:** pastor, participants, volunteers
- **Guidelines:** Whatever metrics you decide on, be consistent.
 - For live streaming, quantify the viewers who watched for at least one minute. You may have one medium represented as a view but there may be two or more people using that medium. Use a multiplier of 1.7 to estimate total viewers. Whatever standard you decide on as a multiplier, be consistent with it.
 - For measuring social media engagement (outside of videos and live streaming) on Facebook, their algorithms for insights change often. However, there are at least four that have been consistent over the last eight years: post engagement, post likes, page likes and page followers. Focus on no more than two insights for each social medium.

References:

1. CDC and Whitehouse.org, (2020) [Opening Up America Again Guidelines.](#)
2. United Methodist Communications Public Information Team, (2018) “Crisis Communications: A Reference Guide for United Methodist Communicators.” The United Methodist Church Press Center.
3. Burnett, Rev. Miriam J. MD, MDIV, MPH Medical Director, (2020) [Church Preparation and Response to Potential Pandemics.](#) AME Church International Health Commission President, Resource and Promotion of Health Alliance. Inc.