



Healthy at Church

Guidelines for returning to worship from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Kentucky.

As Kentucky begins to reopen segments of its economy, the conversation has started to shift from being healthy at home to being healthy at work. As pastors and congregations, we should begin talking about how we will be healthy at church, especially healthy in worship.

Many congregations and clergy in the Region have asked about guidelines for reopening our churches and returning to gathered worship. The decisions on which steps to take and when rest with the pastors and leaders of each congregation.

It is our prayer that we will all approach these decisions prayerfully and collaboratively. This information is offered as a way for pastors and church leaders to listen to one another, discuss plans for each step, and communicate their decisions to the congregation.

Following state and federal guidelines, segments of the economy will reopen in phases. Congregations should plan a phased return as well. The federal guidelines call for a three-phase approach, and we expect that Kentucky's guidelines will follow a similar pattern.

Throughout All Phases

- Practice good hygiene.
- Anyone who does not feel well should stay home. This includes the pastors and worship leaders.
- Maintain recommended social distancing (6 feet).
- Wear masks as recommended by state guidance.
- Disinfect common areas and surfaces.
- Provide handwashing or sanitizing stations.

Vulnerable Populations

As we increase gathering, we must make decisions and communicate decisions clearly with our most vulnerable populations in mind. These are people most susceptible and most at risk to the novel coronavirus. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) define vulnerable populations as:

- individuals over 65;
- individuals with serious underlying health conditions, including high blood pressure, chronic lung disease, diabetes, obesity, and asthma;
- those whose immune system is compromised, such as by chemotherapy for cancer and other conditions requiring such therapy.

Those who live in the same household as a vulnerable individual should follow the guidelines as if they were also vulnerable.

As we think about the vulnerable individuals in our congregations, we might begin to ask:

- *What portion of the congregation would be considered vulnerable individuals or households?*
- *Of those most vulnerable, how many would feel they should be at church and in worship if they know the doors are open?*
- *Are the pastors, elders, and other leaders vulnerable individuals?*
- *What special considerations are needed for these people in order for them to participate in worship or other activities even though they still need to be healthy at home?*
- *What plans do we need should the pastor become infected or be required to quarantine?*

You Will Need

- *Masks*
- *Hand sanitizer*
- *Disinfecting wipes*
- *Nitrile gloves*
- *Training on the use of gloves and disinfecting practices. A healthcare professional in the congregation may be able to provide this.*

Masks

Everyone attending an in-person worship service should be wearing a cloth mask throughout the service. A person can remove their mask while speaking to the congregation, and singers can remove their masks while singing. Keep in mind that congregational singing is discouraged during Phases I and II.

A person can remove their mask to receive communion but only in compliance with practices that maintain social distance and only when away from the communion elements. Masks should be worn by anyone who is preparing or cleaning up communion.

Masks should only be put on and removed using the ear loops. Do not touch the part of the mask that covers the nose and mouth.

The congregation should have a supply of masks on hand that can be given away, but recommend that people bring their own.

Distancing in Sanctuaries

Social distancing requirements will dramatically reduce the seating capacity of a congregation's worship and fellowship spaces. For example, to maintain a six-foot distance between households in the sanctuary, every other pew or row of chairs will be empty. Each pew or row will be no more than half-filled. This reduces the capacity of the worship space by two-thirds or three-fourths. People returning to worship may not be able to sit in their regular spot during worship.

Give some thought to how you will indicate where people can and cannot sit. Also, congregation leaders will need much discernment about who will enforce required distancing and how it will be enforced.

Attention to Surfaces

Commonly used surfaces should be sanitized before and after any gathering. This includes meeting tables and kitchen surfaces. Current research indicates that the novel coronavirus only lives for three days on a dry surface. Surfaces and items that are only used weekly should not need to be disinfected. However, if time and people are available to disinfect these items and surfaces, it would be good to take this additional precaution.

Phase I

This may begin following a 14-day period of decline in confirmed Covid-19 cases.

- Vulnerable individuals and households should continue to participate in worship from home.
- Gatherings should be limited to 10 people, given that proper distancing is practiced.
- Schools and in-person youth activities remain closed.
- Church employees who can should continue to telework.

Most congregations probably will not gather for worship in this phase, and much of the church's ministry will still be happening online. Congregations will still be using online worship practices they have developed.

Small groups of ten or less might begin to meet, wearing masks and practicing social distancing. Surfaces in the areas where the group meets should be wiped down with disinfecting wipes before and after each gathering. Some office staff may return to the church building, but if possible, church staff should continue to telework.

Phase II

This may begin in the absence of a resurgence, indicated by another 14-day downward trend in cases.

- Vulnerable individuals and households should continue to participate in worship and other activities from home.
- Gatherings should be limited to 50 people, given that appropriate distancing is practiced.
- Schools and in-person youth activities may resume.
- Gathering in common areas, like the church narthex, should still be avoided.
- Avoid surfaces and objects that would normally be touched by different people, such as the handle on the coffee urn.

Worship gatherings may resume in several congregations; however, social distancing protocols should be maintained.

Phase III

This begins with no evidence of a resurgence, indicated by another 14-day downward trend in confirmed cases of Covid-19.

- *Vulnerable individuals and their households may return to church gatherings; however, they should maintain recommended distancing. Vulnerable individuals should use their discretion regarding whether they should attend worship.*
- *Everyone should minimize time in crowded environments.*

Although we will likely never return to the way things were, we will begin to approach that in this phase. Nevertheless, we should continue to use what we have learned and the new skills we have developed. We will not go back to the way things were before. Through this crisis, God has called us into a new and hopeful future!

We will serve and witness in new ways, reaching more people with the good news of God's love shown to us in Jesus Christ!

Communion

- **Passing trays.** *Probably the most contagious thing we do during worship is pass communion and offering trays. Communion is central to our worship practice, and it is also a highly contagious activity. We cannot serve communion in a way that requires several people to touch common surfaces and objects. **We will not be able to pass trays** from one person to another to serve communion.*
- **Preparation.** *People preparing communion should wear masks, use hand sanitizer, and wear nitrile gloves. Find a way to combine bread and cup into a single unit. Congregations may use stacked communion cups, where a piece of bread is placed in a cup, a second cup is placed on top partially filled with juice. A congregation might also purchase pre-filled juice and wafer cups. Keep in mind that stacking disposable communion cups doubles the consumption rate of the cups and generates twice as much trash.*
- **Cleaning up.** *Empty cups can be placed in pew or chair racks. Persons who pick up and discard used communion items should wear gloves and masks.*
- **Serving during worship.** *We cannot serve in a manner where everyone in the congregation touches the trays, pulling out pieces of bread and cups of juice. Any form of common cup communion, like intinction, is strictly off the table. We can place stacked cups or pre-filled juice and wafer cups in trays and invite people to come forward to receive. Rather than allowing each to take their own communion, though, a gloved and masked deacon should hand each worshipper the communion elements. When transferring from one hand to another, don't touch hands. If a gloved hand touches an ungloved hand, the gloves should be changed immediately.*
- **Bring your own communion.** *Each household might bring their own elements of bread and juice. We should still have communion elements available for people who forget or anyone who might be visiting. This can be offered as people enter, observing the sanitize, mask, and glove protocol described above.*
- **Place communion elements on pew or chairs.** *Pre-packaged communion could be placed on chairs or pews prior to the worship service. This would also give an indication of where households are able to sit.*
- **Handing out elements as people enter.** *This is an alternative to having worshippers come forward during the communion service, and it works well with the prepackaged wafer and juice cups. As with serving during worship, though, the deacons handing out communion elements should use hand sanitizer and wear nitrile gloves and masks.*

Communion is a central part of our worship, and in many ways it reflects our core values and beliefs. Serving communion in the Reformed tradition by passing trays, for example, demonstrates the priesthood of the believer. We cannot and should not neglect the symbolic impact of changes in how we serve and share communion.

Baptism

Until a vaccine is widely available, baptism by immersion can only be done one at a time. That is, after one person is baptized, the baptistry needs to be emptied, cleaned, and refilled. If the baptistry can circulate water, it could be kept filled and an appropriate amount of chlorine bleach added to the water after a baptism. Still, the congregation would need to wait another week to hold the next baptism by immersion.

For the time being, a congregation could adopt another mode of baptism, such as pouring or sprinkling. If desired, when possible, candidates could be offered an immersion experience.

Another alternative would be to return to the early church practice of performing baptisms in moving water, that is, a running stream. Just as a caution, remember that moving water is colder.

Although we recognize other modes of baptism, practicing believer's baptism by immersion has been part of the Disciples' identity and core values. As with communion, we should not neglect the symbolic impact of changing how we practice baptism.

Offering

As with serving communion, we cannot receive an offering by having everyone gathered touch the offering trays. A box or bucket should be set up where people can leave their offering. We can also continue to encourage online giving.

Singing

Some of the first confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Kentucky were traced to a choir rehearsal. Singing is a very efficient and effective way aerosolize and spread the virus. Choirs may not be leading worship music for a while. Consider instead using soloists, duets, or small ensembles where a greater than recommended distance can be practiced.

Congregational singing in worship is not only an expression of praise and a way of teaching the faith, it is also a community activity, something the assembled body of Christ does together. We unite our voices and hear the sound of the whole. If congregational singing continues, masks are absolutely necessary. Wearing masks will noticeably change the tone of singing, but this is preferred to the potential of spraying the virus into the room.

Nursery and Child Care

As long as state guidelines do not allow child care centers to open, churches should not provide nursery or child care. Children will need to sit with their families. This will apply to children's Sunday school classes as well.

A children's moment could still be part of worship; however, children should remain seated with their families while someone speaks to them from the front of the worship space.

Food and Meals

For the foreseeable future, probably until a vaccine is widely available, we will not be able to have the potluck and pitch-in dinners that we have shared and enjoyed. The primary issue is everyone passing through the line, touching serving utensils, and having their hands over the food.

A congregation might consider having plated dinners as an alternative. These could be catered with servers. Using servers would allow for proper distancing and minimizing contact with surfaces and utensils.

Seating for the meal would still require appropriate distancing.

Microphones

Do not pass or share microphones. Always use wind screens. Sanitize and replace windscreens after each service. Clean the microphone grilles as feasible.

Masks may not be required when people are singing or speaking. This makes it all the more necessary to sanitize and replace windscreens.

Worship Bulletins

If the congregation continues to use worship bulletins, bulletins could be placed in the pews prior to the service.

Visitors and Hospitality

One thing that separates churches from many workplaces is our desire to have people we don't know join us for worship. We are called to offer hospitality to strangers. During this season of online worship, many pastors have reported attendance at online services that significantly exceeded attendance at in-person services.

We are called to offer hospitality, and that call requires us to consider several questions. What if folks who have worshipped with us online decide to attend when we start holding in-person worship? How are we going to welcome people who may come to worship without a mask? How will we respond if welcoming additional people in worship means we cannot maintain required distancing?

Community

Each congregation serves in a different context, and each congregation makes their own decisions. Make the decisions about how and when you return to gathered worship in conversation with other congregations and pastors in your community. Don't succumb to pressure or bullying, and lead in a way that brings others with you. Don't miss this opportunity to collaborate with the other congregations in your community.

Resurgence

Remember that if we see a resurgence of Covid-19, we will return to being healthy at home. The clock will start over, and that may happen. We may be in a start and stop economy for the next several months.

Congregations can help avoid that resurgence by acting prayerfully and collaboratively. By listening to one another and clearly communicating our plans to the congregation, we can hasten the day that we gather again, uniting our hearts in one accord and in a shared space.

***We are going to get through this. We will gather again
for worship, building one another up for mission,
witness, and service.***