



Missouri Mid-South Conference United Church of Christ

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We are the United Church of Christ in Arkansas, Memphis, and Missouri

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Suggested MMS Phased Reopening Plan for Churches (as of May 1, 2020)

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.” Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Like the wisdom writer from the Hebrew Scriptures, we are reminded that there is a time for every season, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the governors of Arkansas, Memphis, and Missouri have encouraged faith communities to consider reopening, I, as your Conference Minister, seek to provide support and resources for your Church leadership in order to prayerfully consider how and when you will reopen your church. I want to reiterate that given the severity of this pandemic, I strongly encourage you to consider taking your time in reopening your worship and ministry to in-person gatherings.

The following is a recommended guideline to a phased reopening of your in-person church ministry. As I have stated in previous recommendations, I reiterate that I, as your Conference Minister, have no authority over how your Church reopens. I respect your local church autonomy in this and all matters. However, given the serious nature of this pandemic, I offer you this recommendation as a starting point from which your Church leadership can create your own phased plan for reopening your Church during the pandemic. **Please note these phases 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, I recommend that you return to Phase 1 and follow protocol accordingly.**

I researched the Center for Disease Control, each state’s department of health recommendations, and UCC/ecumenical documents regarding phases of reopening recommendations. I have included those references at the end of this document for your information. This recommendation provides five phases of reopening your church for in-person worship during the COVID-19 pandemic. They are described in the following manner as well as charts for your usage:

Phase One Stay-at-Home Order by City/County/State

- Online Worship only
- Online Meetings only
- Church Office and Building Closed completely

Phase Two 2 Weeks of Declining COVID Case Counts in Your State

Widespread availability of testing

No PPE Shortage

- Limited in-person worship of 10 people¹ maximum (paired with online worship)
- Online Meetings only
- Church Office closed

¹ All children, youth, and adults are included in this maximum number.

Phase Three

4 Weeks of Declining COVID-19 Case Counts in Your State

Widespread availability of testing

No PPE Shortage

- In-Person Worship of 25 people maximum
 - Continue holding online worship along with in-person worship of no more than 25 people.
 - Encourage those at high-risk to worship online.²
 - In-person worship should have space large enough to allow for physical distancing of 6 feet between family units with the following suggestions:
 - One family per pew/row with an empty pew/row separating every family unit.
 - Every other pew/row is blocked off in order to create 6-foot physical distancing requirement.
 - Assess worship space in advance in order to ensure physical distancing requirements can be met before, during, and after worship.
 - Develop a plan if more than 25 people come for in-person worship
 - Face masks are required of all in-person worship attendees!
- No Singing at In-Person Worship
 - The CDC identifies singing as a high-risk action during this pandemic. Therefore, we recommend that singing be limited to the choir only while all choir members wear their mask.
- No Personal Touch Rituals of In-Person Worship (including the following)
 - No Passing the peace of Christ
 - No Fellowship pad, hymnals, and pew Bibles should be used
 - 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 Offering plate usage (see below for alternatives)
 - No Communion plate or intinction (see below for alternatives)
 - Usher Distance
 - All ushers must maintain physical distance of 6 feet.
 - It is suggested that ushers wear gloves in order to provide an additional layer of safety for worship participants and ushers. (see below for additional suggestions for ushers)
- No Fellowship food before or after worship
- No Nursery During Worship
 - In order to ensure the safety of all children and nursery workers during physical distancing, we recommend all children remain with their families during worship.
- No In-Person Small Group Meetings
 - No Sunday School, bible studies, youth gatherings.

Phase Four

8 Weeks of Declining COVID-19 Case Counts in Your State

Widespread availability of testing

No PPE Shortage

- In-Person Worship (no more than 50 people worshipping in-person)
 - Continue holding online worship along with in-person worship of no more than 50 people.
 - Encourage those at high-risk to worship online.³

² High Risk includes those age 60 or older, those with auto-immune challenges, those identified as high-risk by your county's Department of Health.

³ High Risk includes those age 60 or older, those with auto-immune challenges, those identified as high-risk by your county's Department of Health.

- In-person worship should have space large enough to allow for physical distancing of 6 feet between family units with the following suggestions:
 - One family per pew/row with an empty pew/row separating every family unit.
 - Every other pew/row is blocked off in order to create 6-foot physical distancing requirement.
 - Assess worship space in advance in order to ensure physical distancing requirements can be met before, during, and after worship.
- Develop a plan if more than 50 people come for in-person worship
- Face masks are required of all in-person worship attendees!
- Limited Singing at In-Person Worship
 - We recommend all singing to be done while everyone wears their masks.
- No Personal Touch Rituals of In-Person Worship (including the following)
 - No Passing of the Peace of Christ
 - No Fellowship pad, hymnals, and pew Bibles should be used
 - No Time with the Children (where children come forward)
 - No Offering plate usage (see below for alternatives)
 - No Communion plate or intinction (see below for alternatives)
 - Usher Distance
 - All ushers must maintain physical distance of 6 feet.
- Limited Fellowship food before or after worship
- Limited In-Person Small Group Meetings⁴
- No Sunday School, bible studies, youth gatherings.

Phase Five Vaccine Developed and Provided to Whole Population

- All in-person church activities can be observed only AFTER a vaccine for COVID-19 has been developed and is widely provided to the entire population of your community.

Suggested COVID Case Increase Plan

If COVID infections increase in your county at any time, your Church should immediately close and return to Phase 1 of the MMS Phased Reopening Plan.

Multiple Worship Recommendations for Cleaning

If you have multiple worship services in order to limit the amount of people worshipping/meeting in person, the following suggestions should be considered:

- Allow time for people from the first service to leave so that you can fully clean worship space before allowing worship attenders of next service to enter.
- Develop a plan to clean all areas between services including sanctuary, bathrooms, choir room, entry area/narthex.
- Close off all rooms not needed for worship such as Sunday School rooms, nursery, kitchens, closets.

⁴ Church leaders should assess the maximum number of small group participants appropriate for your church.

Alternatives to Personal Touch Worship Rituals

1. Peace of Christ
 - a. Wave to people from their seats.
 - b. Don't allow people to move around during the Passing of the Peace of Christ.
2. Time with the Children
 - a. Have Children remain in their seats with their families while the leader speaks from the front.
3. Offering
 - a. Provide online giving options.
 - b. Provide envelopes in pew/chairs and have members place checks in the envelope.
 - c. After the service, the usher (with gloves and mask) will pick up all envelopes.
4. Communion
 - a. Have worship attenders bring their own bread and liquid.
 - b. If prepared by church leaders, place bread and grace in a ziplock bag (by someone wearing gloves and a mask).
5. Pew Hymnals/Pew Bibles
 - a. Print everything in a bulletin or powerpoint (using the appropriate copyright information for such usage).

Suggested Requirements for Church Worship Leaders:⁵

- Younger than 60 years old
- Without auto-immune challenges
- Willing to wear gloves and mask and observe physical distancing
- Willing to have temperature taken before worship

Pages 5 and 6 provide charts of the MMS Phased Reopening Plan for your convenience.

⁵ This includes but is not limited to: ushers, ministers, worship leaders, choir director, and choir members. It is not a requirement that those older than 60 not lead worship. However, the CDC has counseled that this age group is at a higher risk for infection.

Suggested In-Person Worship Phases

<u>Action</u>	<u>Phase 1</u> <i>Stay at Home Order</i>	<u>Phase 2</u> <i>2 weeks declining COVID cases</i>	<u>Phase 3</u> <i>4 weeks declining COVID cases</i>	<u>Phase 4</u> <i>8 weeks declining COVID cases</i>	<u>Phase 5</u> <i>Vaccine distributed to all population</i>
In-Person Worship	No	Yes 10 max	Yes 25 max	Yes 50 max	Yes
Singing	No	No	Choir only	Yes with mask	Yes
Peace of Christ	No	No	No	No	Yes
Time With Children	No	No	No	Limited	Yes
Offering	No	No	No	No	Yes
Communion	No	No	No	No	Yes
Hymnals/Pew Bibles	No	No	No	No	Yes
Nursery	No	No	No	Limited	Yes
Bulletins	Yes 1-time use	Yes 1-time use	Yes 1-time use	Yes 1-time use	Yes
Fellowship Before/After	No	No	No	Limited	Yes
In-Person Sunday School/Confirmation/youth gathering event	No	No	No	Limited	Yes

Suggested In-Person Church Events

<u>Action</u>	<u>Phase 1</u> <i>Stay at Home Order</i>	<u>Phase 2</u> <i>2 weeks declining COVID cases</i>	<u>Phase 3</u> <i>4 weeks declining COVID cases</i>	<u>Phase 4</u> <i>8 weeks declining COVID cases</i>	<u>Phase 5</u> <i>Vaccine distributed to all population</i>
In-Person Worship	No	Yes 10 max	Yes 25 max	Yes 50 max	Yes
Physical Distance	Yes	6 feet	6 feet	3 feet	No
Personal Touch Rituals	No	No	No	Limited	Yes
Food Events	No	No	No	No	Yes
In-Person Meetings	No	No	No	Limited	Yes
Office Opened to Public	No	No	No	Limited	Yes
Mission/Ministry Events	No	No	No	Limited	Yes
Church Rentals ⁶	No	No	Yes 25 max	Yes 50 max	Yes

⁶ This is your prerogative regarding how you resume your rental relationships for building usage. This is a suggested guideline for your leadership discussion.

Suggested COVID Case Increase Plan⁷

<u>Action</u>	<u>Phase 1</u> <i>Stay at Home Order</i>	<u>Phase 2</u> <i>2 weeks declining COVID cases</i>	<u>Phase 3</u> <i>4 weeks declining COVID cases</i>	<u>Phase 4</u> <i>8 weeks declining COVID cases</i>	<u>Phase 5</u> <i>Vaccine distributed to all population</i>
In-Person Worship	Online only	Return to Phase 1	Return to Phase 1	Return to Phase 1	Use Caution
Physical Distance	Not applicable	Return to Phase 1	Return to Phase 1	Return to Phase 1	Use Caution
Personal Touch Rituals	Not applicable	Return to Phase 1	Return to Phase 1	Return to Phase 1	Use Caution
Food Events	Not applicable	Return to Phase 1	Return to Phase 1	Return to Phase 1	Use Caution
In-Person Meetings	Online only	Return to Phase 1	Return to Phase 1	Return to Phase 1	Use Caution
Office Opened to Public	No	Return to Phase 1	Return to Phase 1	Return to Phase 1	Use Caution
Mission/Ministry Events	No	Return to Phase 1	Return to Phase 1	Return to Phase 1	Use Caution
Church Rentals	No	Return to Phase 1	Return to Phase 1	Return to Phase 1	Use Caution

References for MMS Phased Reopening Document:

- Center for Disease Control
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>
- Arkansas State Department of Health
 - <https://www.healthy.arkansas.gov/programs-services/topics/novel-coronavirus>
- Tennessee State Department of Health
 - <https://www.tn.gov/health/cedep/ncov.html>
- Missouri State Department of Health
 - <https://health.mo.gov/living/healthcondiseases/communicable/novel-coronavirus/>
- Wisconsin Council of Churches resource
 - <https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/>
- State of Wisconsin Reentry Plan
 - <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p02653a.pdf>
- United Church of Christ resource on reopening
 - https://www.ucc.org/daily_covid_19_brief_issue_26
- Southern New England Conference resource on Phasing Forward
 - <https://www.sneucc.org/phasingforward>
- Missouri Mid-South Conference previous guidelines
 - <https://www.missourimidsouth.org/covid19>

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.



⁷ If there is an increase in COVID-19 positive cases, it is recommended that your church return to phase 1 of the MMS Phased Reopening Plan and follow the precautions of weeks without an increase in COVID cases.