



Western North Carolina Conference
The United Methodist Church

Guidelines for In-Person Worship & Ministry during COVID-19

Updated June 24, 2020

Do No Harm. Do Good. Stay in Love with God.

Greetings, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ:

As faithful disciples of Jesus Christ in the midst of our response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we remain committed to our biblical mandate to “love our neighbors as ourselves” and our Wesleyan call to “Do no harm. Do all the good we can. Follow the ordinances (stay in love) with God.” In doing so, we seek ways to engage faithfully in worship, study, and ministry while ensuring the health and safety of our members and communities.

We celebrate the many ways you, as churches across Western NC, have been creative and innovative during this crisis in how you worship, reach, teach and serve in your communities.

As Bill Wilson, writing for the Center for Healthy Churches states in a recent article, *“We will not be able to un-learn what we have learned about being the church going forward. Our new normal will see us regarding our physical location as one of many expressions of our church. In doing so, we will quite possibly become more of the gathered and scattered church Jesus had in mind for his followers.”*

Our mission has not changed (Matthew 28:16-20). We are called to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This is still happening as we continue to find new ways to worship, connect, grow, serve, and give in the age of COVID-19.

We want to be in alignment with our scriptural and Wesleyan call to “love others” and “do no harm,” and in compliance with public health guidance and governmental mandates.

We do not recommend returning to indoor worship for the foreseeable future, particularly as long as the percentage of positive Covid-19 tests and hospitalizations are not declining. You agree to accept the liability for doing otherwise.

Please use the following guidelines to lead your church safely during this in-between time, and for working with your transition team to plan for eventual indoor worship services. We covenant to continue to update you as conditions change in our local ministry areas.

Current State

<p>Worship</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We do not recommend returning to indoor worship at this time. • Continue hosting online, drive-in, or outdoor worship services while following CDC, state and local guidelines, including handwashing, wearing masks, and observing physical distancing rules. • Most experts recommend no congregational or full choir singing at this time.
<p>Preschools, Children & Youth</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generally, most of our preschools, childcare, children and youth ministries follow public school guidance. As you plan for the Fall, we urge you to be aware of the plan your local school system will be adopting. The CDC and NCDHHS have strict guidelines for reopening of preschools and childcare facilities in order to assist with children of essential workers and to provide support and enrichment for children and families in need. It is difficult for children and youth to practice social distancing. If you plan to reopen any preschools, childcare, or children/youth activities prior to public schools reopening, we ask you to be in touch with your District Superintendent. • Consider creative online children VBS and youth activity options to keep children and youth engaged, making sure to honor the On-Line Safety section of the Safe Sanctuaries Policy.
<p>Mission & Outreach</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No mission trips including youth trips are recommended through the summer. • All outreach to vulnerable populations (food distribution ministries, homeless, etc.) should be done with appropriate physical distance and sanitation practices, including no sit-down meals until public gatherings are safe.
<p>Church Staff</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working remotely is still recommended. • If staff (paid or unpaid) work on-site, you must use the guidelines for size of gatherings, social distancing, masks, gloves, etc. Their presence on-site should be done with minimal overlap. We recommend a daily health-screening and temperature check for on-site staff and volunteers. (Legal and Liability Issues)
<p>Discipleship Formation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groups should meet online as much as possible. • In person meetings should be 10 or less and must follow Safe Sanctuaries policies and all CDC Guidelines for physical distancing. No food should be served or shared during these gatherings.
<p>Leadership, Teams & Committees</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groups should meet online as much as possible. • In person meetings should be 10 or less and must follow Safe Sanctuaries policies and all CDC Guidelines for physical distancing. No food should be served or shared during these gatherings.

Recommendations around each of these areas will be regularly updated and revised. If you have additional questions about a specific area of ministry, please consult your District Superintendent.

What other forms of worship gathering may be acceptable?

The following are forms of worship gathering that may be considered. However, the required safety precautions in the checklist for each worship alternative listed below must be met. **These guidelines will be reviewed and revised regularly based on updated information.**

Worship Options	
Drive-in Church/ Outdoor Worship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use FM transmitter or PA system. • Ensure that members remain in their vehicles, maintain physical distancing, and are only with people from their own household. • Restrooms should remain closed at all times. • Masks are recommended for outdoor worship. • Worshipers should bring their own chairs. • Take attendance for contact tracing in the event an attendee tests positive for COVID-19.
House Churches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage worshipers to gather in homes in groups of 10 or less to worship together with your online worship service. • Encourage those who live near one another to gather close by, use neighborhood club houses, etc. • Use church leaders as hosts to provide hospitality, etc. <p>Note: These house gatherings should adhere to the Safe Sanctuaries Policy and follow CDC guidelines for physical distancing. No food should be served or shared.</p>
Funeral Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maximum 50 persons allowed in service ONLY IF physical distancing can be ensured or unless sitting with persons from their own household. • Masks should be worn by participants. • No reception or greeting line. • No bulletins. • No congregational singing. • Online streaming of service for others to participate virtually is encouraged.
Weddings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gathering should be of 10 or less people for the service including the couple and the clergy. • No reception or greeting of guests. • No bulletins. • No congregational singing. • Online streaming of service for others to participate virtually is encouraged.

Preparing for Being Together: Staff, Volunteers & Space

When state and local guidelines determine it is safe for church employees to return to the church facilities as part of their normal work schedule, local church leaders must be prepared to establish, document and most importantly rigorously follow clear guidelines. **These guidelines will be regularly reviewed and revised based on updated information.**

CHECKLIST: Preparing Staff & Volunteers

- Ensure facility has adequate amounts of masks and gloves for staff and volunteers (particularly greeters & cleaners).
- Plan an online session to review hygiene, cleaning/disinfecting practices that will be expected upon return.
- Develop plans for changing worship logistics to ensure safety of attendees (e.g. offering, communion). *More ideas in the next section.*
- Develop protocol for ushers & greeters that would allow for social distancing. You may consider new roles for volunteers in high-risk categories. *More ideas in the next section.*
- Create a trial phase to document and practice communications, processes & procedures that will ensure safety when indoor worship is initiated, learning what is and is not effective.
- Publish your local guidelines for anyone on church property. Monitor understanding and adherence to guidelines among staff. Identify any needed guideline or process remediation.
- At the time you consider reopening a preschool, contact your District Superintendent regarding compliance with all guidelines.
- Establish a comprehensive tracking and notification system to record attendees to each service (including name, address, and contact information) in the event an infection outbreak occurs. Identify person(s) responsible for maintaining the tracking and notification system.

Preparing for Being Together: Staff, Volunteers & Space

CHECKLIST: Preparing Your Space

- Ensure 3-month supply of cleaning/sanitizing products. Have a system in place to reorder items before they are depleted.
- Eliminate places to congregate (e.g. store chairs; eliminate coffee stations.)
- Thoroughly sanitize all surfaces, especially those in high-traffic areas.
- Develop congregational seating plan for physical distancing. Ensure at least a 6-ft distance.
- Develop protocol for sanitizing to take place before and after service and in real-time during worship.
- Walk through each step of indoor worship multiple times. Follow signage, communications & directions that will be provided to worshipers. Refine as needed.

[Click here for CDC Guidelines for more information on properly cleaning, disinfecting, and sanitizing your facility.](#)

What About Indoor Worship?

“Should we?” not “Could we?”

We all have missed gathering for worship and long to be together again. As you consider whether and how you can gather indoors for worship there are a number of questions to answer by a team of leaders that includes the pastor:

- Is there a sustained increase or decline in the rate of infections (percentage of positive tests), hospitalizations, and COVID-related deaths in your [zip code](#) and surrounding communities?
- What is the size of your worshipping congregation and the number of vulnerable persons, including pastor(s) and church staff, in your setting?
- Have you reviewed your general liability coverage and spoken with your agent about whether there are exclusions for infectious and communicable diseases?
- Can you create a safe environment and carefully adhere to public health and safety protocols as defined by the CDC, NCDHHS, and local government regulations?
- Do you have a plan to engage worshippers online as not all members will choose to be on campus at first or at all?
- Are you willing to insist that masks are worn by all those in attendance? A mask communicates “I want to help keep my family, neighbors, and community safe.” In other words, “my mask protects YOU. And your mask protects ME.” Part of the Gospel mandate is to care for our neighbor, and we care for our neighbor in worship by protecting them from ourselves, in the event that we are carrying the virus unknowingly.
- Have you paid careful attention to the checklists and guidance provided on pages 7-11 of this document?

One Size Does Not Fit All!

Returning to indoor worship will require a phased-in approach and may be different for each congregation based on size, location, and congregational needs. To promote the safest practices, it is recommended that [CDC](#) guidelines, local guidelines (including [state](#), county and local), denominational guidelines, the [24 Questions](#), [Resuming Care-Filled Worship and Sacramental Life](#), and [Legal and Liability issues](#), all be considered when making decisions about when to enter a new phase. Church officials must be aware of the [local situation](#) and should tailor their path through the phases of these guidelines to ensure that they are appropriate to the [local situation](#).

REMEMBER, being “allowed” to do something does not mean it is the best thing or the right thing at the right time for a local church, a family, or an individual. We want to open faithfully and safely.

Goals:

- **Create confidence** for the church staff and leadership as plans are made for when and how to return to the church campus
- **Witness to safety over expedience.**
- **Identify challenges** that would hinder bringing people back to campus safely. See the [24 Questions](#) as a helpful resource.
- **Get comfortable** with the "new normal."
- **Continue to foster creativity and innovation for new ways to connect safely and effectively for years to come!**

We do not recommend returning to indoor worship for the foreseeable future, particularly as long as the percentage of positive Covid-19 tests and hospitalizations are not declining. You agree to accept the liability for doing otherwise.

Initial Return to **Indoor** Worship

If in reviewing these guidelines, the church determines they cannot be met for Sunday worship, it is recommended that the church continue worshipping online or outdoors and review other indoor ministries for the ability to meet the guidelines. **These guidelines will be reviewed regularly and revised based on updated information. As we move through launch phases, new guidelines will be communicated.**

CHECKLIST: The Church is ready to return to a version of indoor worship when:

- Church & staff are in compliance with state/local orders regarding distancing, gathering & sanitation (including the ability to sanitize common areas before, during, and after worship).
- The church is properly staffed with the trained volunteers/lay people necessary to regulate and enforce state/local orders regarding distancing, gathering, sanitation (incl. seating, mask wearing, bathroom occupancy, opening/closing doors, parking).
- The church can provide reasonable accommodation to allow for comfortable worship while still complying with physical distancing requirements (for example: clearly marked areas, large spaces for families, special seating for high risk individuals, etc.)
- The church has a clear, proactive communication strategy to ensure congregants are aware of current practices and safety/wellness protocols (e.g. email, website, social media, signage at the church).
- The church has a dedicated team which reviews the church's compliance to state/local protocols and agrees upon any necessary exceptions.

Who Should Attend Indoor Worship services?

Congregants who meet the following criteria are recommended to attend indoor worship if they so desire:

- People who are well (no recent contact with infected persons, not exhibiting flu-like symptoms)
- Clergy, worship team (technical and performing), ushers/lay leaders
- People who are willing to wear a mask
- People who cannot attend online
- People who feel it is the right time for their family

Ideas for **Safe** Indoor Worship

The following are not to be seen as requirements, but rather ideas to help churches manage worship logistics in their phased relaunch of indoor worship. **NOTE: Consider continuing online only church until guidelines can be relaxed to where a comfortable, normal worship environment is achievable. These guidelines will be reviewed regularly and revised based on updated information. As we move through launch phases, new guidelines will be communicated.**

	Recommendations
Attendance Registration	<p>Goal: Prevent sharing germs via physical items passed from person to person.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain attendance records for visitor follow-up and for contact tracing in the event an attendee tests positive for COVID-19. • No physical attendance pads passed. • Create online attendance registration. • Have usher/greeter fill out attendance register through verbal conversation as people enter. • Have individual cards available as people enter for those who do not want to fill out online registration.
A/V Equipment	<p>Goal: Prevent germ sharing and germs that stay on surfaces longer.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sanitize before and after each service. • Identify microphones to be used by single individuals, no shared microphones, music stands, etc.
Ceremonies	<p>Goal: Honor traditions while keeping everyone safe.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider how your church will address special events: baptisms, weddings, funerals, Vacation Bible School. What events should be cancelled and what other events can be postponed or “retooled” in a different format? • Limit baptisms to one person per filling of the baptismal pool or one infant per bowl of water in the sanctuary.
Holy Communion	<p>Goal: Prevent spread of germs through food, passed elements, etc.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize individual pre-packaged elements handed out as people enter worship venue • Utilize individual cups, wafers, etc., passed out by individual who has sanitized hands and is wearing gloves. • Offer a blessing/prayer for those who do not choose to receive communion during this time.
Entry & Exit	<p>Goal: Control pathways, prevent traffic jams, ensure everyone entering worship space has used precautions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Place hand sanitizer at entries and exits. • Have a single entry point with clearly marked exits. • Create a walk-through video to show the path/process.

Ideas for Safe Indoor Worship (Cont.)

	Recommendations
Food & Beverage	<p>Goal: Prevent germ sharing and germs that stay on surfaces longer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discontinue all food and beverage service on campus until further notice. • Use pre-packaged foods given by staff or volunteers with sanitized hands and gloves on.
Interpersonal Interaction	<p>Goal: Prevent airborne droplets of potential germs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shorten services to allow for more time to enter/exit the premises • Be aware of physical distancing • Discontinue any hand holding, passing of the peace, hand shaking, etc. Instead encourage another way to greet each other at a distance (smile and wave, or make it fun – Click here for ideas).
Masks	<p>Goal: Prevent the spread of the virus.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Masks MUST be worn by all those in attendance. Those who do not wish to wear a mask should not come into the building or worship space but can continue to worship online. • Persons should be encouraged to bring their own masks and the church should have additional masks available for those who need one.
Offering	<p>Goal: Prevent sharing germs via physical items passed from person to person</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discontinue use of offering plates, baskets, etc., passed in pews • Encourage online giving. • Use central (at entries or exits, along designated single-direction pathway) collection units. • Offer prayer that specifically mentions online offering to honor & encourage online giving.
Pew Paraphernalia	<p>Goal: Prevent germ sharing and germs that stay on surfaces for longer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove all individual items in pews (Bibles, hymnals, pens/pencils, offering envelopes, attendance registers. • Use projection for liturgy, announcements and lyrics. • Encourage bringing personal bibles/hymnals. • Utilize single-use bulletins with song lyrics, etc., that are handed out by individuals who have sanitized hands/wear gloves and disposed of them as people leave service. <p>For smaller churches – Consider sanitizing hymnals and give one to each person/family.</p>

Ideas for Safe Indoor Worship (Cont.)

	Recommendations
Reservation System	<p>Goal: Ensure rules of physical distancing can be followed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do not fill to occupancy through reservations alone; leave space for guests or unplanned attendees who may not have a reservation. Reserved seats should be filled in a timely manner (e.g. 5 minutes after the service begins), otherwise they will be released to walk-ins. Reservation systems must be reliable, easy to use, and accessible.
Seating	<p>Goal: Prevent passing of germs and observe physical distancing rules</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage physical distancing measures from family to family. Sit every other pew or have a 6-foot space between each family unit. Consider dismissing from worship by family, row, or section of the congregation.
Simultaneous Services	<p>Goal: Ensure rules of physical distancing can be followed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have smaller groups on campus. Have each group within a different area with service simulcast in multiple places (classrooms, fellowship hall, etc.)
Singing/Spoken Liturgy	<p>Goal: Prevent airborne droplets of potential germs that linger in the air</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Health experts recommend eliminating all congregational singing for now. Suspend choir practices and anthems as forceful breathing and exhaling can expel the virus further if someone is infected. Special music may be provided by small ensembles/groups who can socially distance. To encourage congregational participation use congregational Scripture reading and/or responsive readings, etc.
Smaller Groups, More Services	<p>Goal: Ensure rules of physical distancing can be followed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shorten services. Divide congregation members and assign to services. Offer reservation system for services.
Surfaces	<p>Goal: Prevent germ sharing and germs that stay on surfaces longer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All surfaces people come into contact with – seating, doors, etc. – should be sanitized and wiped down between services. Click here for the CDC’s guidance on cleaning and disinfecting your facility.
Vestments	<p>Goal: Prevent germ sharing and germs that stay on surfaces longer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discontinue use of shared vestments – choir robes, acolyte robes, etc.

Ideas for Safe Indoor Worship (Cont.)

	Recommendations
Volunteer Roles	<p>Goal: Show volunteers they are valued while keeping them safe</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allow for new roles for ushers who may be in a higher-risk category.• Take time to re-vision what roles previously centralized around physical elements/interaction. Give people a different purpose instead of leaving them behind.• Create a sanitation team to keep things clean.• Consider temperature checks for all staff and volunteers.