

Return to Gathering: Recommendations and Gatherings

As we prepare to re-imagine what Church might look like in the future, the following is a tool and starting point for discussion among your leadership. It is not meant to be all-inclusive. We are indeed, as the churches of the Susquehanna Conference, connected by Spirit, but we provide ministry in many different contexts. At this time, stay at home orders will be lifted in different areas of the state at different times and at differing phases. That does not mean our church buildings will be able to reopen for worship. It is imperative that all CDC guidelines, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania guidelines, local county and municipal guidelines, and directives from the Susquehanna Conference be followed.

Our values shape and inform our decisions as we continually re-evaluate and discern the best ways to love one another and do no harm. There will be a podcast offered by Grow, Equip and Connect on the Susquehanna Conference website that explores the values that should define our decisions.

As you prepare to gather once again, please be aware of the three phases for re-opening and the guidelines and group size restrictions the Pennsylvania government has put in place. It is imperative we continue to follow these directives. A complete description of the phased reopening can be found at <https://www.pa.gov/guides/responding-to-covid-19/#PhasedReopening>

RED PHASE

- Stay at home ordered.
- Gatherings of more than 10 prohibited.
- Church services and all non-essential ministries should not be conducted in person.
- Begin planning how to resume worship and ministries with safeguards in place.

YELLOW PHASE

- Stay at home restrictions lifted in favor of aggressive mitigation.
- Gatherings of more than 25 prohibited.
- Worship in groups of 25 or less, small group Bible studies, church office staff, church leadership, and ministries under 25 people could consider meeting in person during the yellow phase with all safety precautions in place.
- Continue planning for resuming worship and ministries with safeguards in place.

GREEN PHASE

- Aggressive mitigation orders lifted. Individuals must follow CDC & PA Department of Health Guidelines.
- Social distancing measure will likely still need to be maintained to keep people safe and healthy.
- Continue planning that will keep safeguards in place.

Communication is key in each phase of the re-gathering process. A checklist of questions and minimum recommendations for when it is safe to enter the yellow phase is provided for your leadership. It is suggested that leadership continue to use this document for planning through all phases.

WHAT TO DO NOW

Who will lead this re-gathering process?

Who should have input in the discussion?

When will it be safe to return to worship?

What precautions will we plan to take?

How will you stay informed of CDC, PA, local, municipal and Conference guidelines?

What will a safety plan include?

Who will keep notes on best practices and what works, what doesn't?

Who will lead the process for preparing the building?

Who will lead the process for returning to the worship space?

Who will lead the process for returning to Christian Education and Small Group ministries?

Who will be responsible for communicating changing worship and gathering information?

What are various means of communication that must be included?

What other questions need to be asked? What other information do we need?

Stay informed by checking these websites regularly for timelines, guidelines and protocols

- Center for Disease Control: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>
- Commonwealth of Pennsylvania: <https://www.pa.gov/guides/responding-to-covid-19/>
- Susquehanna Conference: <https://www.susumc.org/covid-19/>

Prepare a plan for tracking in-person worship attendance. Prepare a safety plan if someone should become sick. Prepare a plan for communicating with those who may have come into contact with that individual while also maintaining privacy and pastoral care.

Second Wave. We don't want to think about a second wave of COVID-19, but medical experts are saying this is a very real possibility. Continue to keep this in mind as you are making plans to move back into in-person worship and ministries. Continue to keep your re-gathering team in place. Keep good notes on what works and what has not. Keep a list of best practices you are hearing from other churches.

PREPARING YOUR CHURCH BUILDING FOR GATHERING

Who is leading this process of preparing the building?

What is your timeline for re-evaluation and on-going care?

Who will be responsible for maintaining cleaning supplies, tissues, soap, hand sanitizer, etc.?

How will you deep clean the entire church, paying special attention to preschool and children's areas; gathering areas; bathrooms; kitchens; places where germs are most likely to be transferred?

How will you clean and sanitize before and after each gathering?

Will you implement cleaning checklists for each area of the building?

How can you allow for proper drying times between worship and events?

Will you plan to clean and flush water systems that have not been in use?

Will you plan to clean air ducts and heating systems that have not been in use?

How will you deal with shortages of cleaning materials and resources?

Will you have designated entrances, exits, building traffic patterns, sanitizing stations?

How will you keep physical distancing? Use of tape, remove chairs, use cones, designation of pews for proper distancing, use of every other bathroom stall?

How will your congregation know the building is safe and that safe practices are in place?

What signage will you post throughout the building as reminders of protocols?

What signage might you post indicating symptoms and urging people to stay home and seek medical attention if they have symptoms?

What activities might need to be suspended, such as coffee hours and other gatherings where people might risk cross-contamination?

How will you update your building use agreements to reflect the new realities of COVID-19?

How will updated agreements be communicated and distributed to those who use the building?

What other information do we need?

Resources:

- Susquehanna Conference Safety Committee Guidelines for Gradually Resuming Conference Operations
- Engle, Hambright & Davies: <https://ehd-ins.com/covid-19-updates/>
- Cleaning and sanitizing products recommended by the CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/cleaning-disinfection.html>
- Center for Disease Control: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>
- National Institutes of Health: <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/new-coronavirus-stable-hours-surfaces>

WORSHIP

Who will lead this process of re-starting in-person worship?

What is your timeline for re-evaluation and ongoing care?

How will online and alternative types of worship continue to be offered?

What will be the most critical “no-touch” safety practices to put in place for your worship space?

What will phase one, phase two, phase three, etc. look like in your church context and as conditions change?

How will you ensure physical distancing once on-site worship is permitted?

How many people can your worship space hold if you are worshipping in family groups sitting 6 feet apart?

Will services need to be shorter?

Will the number of services need to change depending on church size? (Be sure to factor in new people in your community who will be worshipping with you for the first time).

What plan is in place for when you’ve reached maximum numbers and more people show up?

How will you help people maintain safe space when entering and exiting?

With singing considered high risk (even with masks), how will you offer music in worship?

How will you discourage congregating before or after worship?

Who will be responsible for reminding people of safe protocols?

What safe practices will be implemented for hospitality and how will hospitality teams (greeters, ushers) be trained on safe practices?

How will you provide masks for those who do not bring their own from home?

Where will hand sanitizing stations be placed?

How will you communicate safe practices to those who will attend worship?

How will you receive the offering?

How will you provide communion once safe to do so?

How will you use print materials (bulletins, hymnals, Bibles, following safety precautions?

What cleaning procedures will be in place for microphones and tech equipment?

What safety precautions will be in place for weddings, funerals, confirmation and baptism?

What other information do we need?

Minimum Recommendations for Safe Practices During the Yellow Phase:

- High risk individuals should continue to shelter in place until they feel it is safe to return.
- Continue all online and alternative worship opportunities.
- Adhere to group size restrictions.
- Ask congregants to bring masks and sanitizer from home, and provide masks and sanitizing stations for those who do not have their own.
- Remove pew hymnals, Bibles, pencils, attendance pads, welcome cards, etc. and rely upon audio visual, verbal instructions, or if you must have bulletins have one person with gloves distribute printed bulletins.
- Offerings can be placed in bins at the entrances of spaces. Those collecting and counting the offering will need to do so following guidelines for safe physical distancing and protocols. Continue online giving opportunities.
- The risk of offering a nursery is very high. Plan for families to worship together.
- The risk for singing is high due to producing droplets/aerosolized particles.
- The risk for choirs is high Plan not to have a choir sing.

- If you do some form of children's time during worship, continue to do so but without inviting children to come forward or gather together.
- Consider suspending in-person communion or offer alternatives, such as bringing bread and juice from home or using prepackaged communion elements to be picked up individually on the altar rail.
- Weddings, funerals, confirmations can take place by keeping within the group size restrictions for gathering and observing physical distancing protocols.
- Baptisms. Children and infants should remain in their parents arms. If more than one person is being baptized, provide separate water containers for each individual baptism. Pastors will need to use hand sanitizer between multiple baptisms. Parents and pastors should not walk the child up and down the aisle as part of the celebration.
- Parking lot worship could be a consideration depending on maximum gathering restrictions:
 - Communicate safety plan and best practices.
 - Consider using every other or every third parking space.
 - Use volunteers or signage to direct flow of entrance and exit and parking, following physical distancing guideline at all times.
 - No one should leave vehicles for any reason.
 - No bathroom facilities.
 - No playground
 - No exchanges of any materials of any kind.
 - Only FM transmitters should be used so that car windows do not need to be open reducing the risk of airborne particles.

CHILDREN AND SMALL GROUP MINISTRIES

Who will lead the process of re-starting children and small group ministries?

What is your timeline for re-evaluation and on-going care?

What safety precautions will need to be in place in order for parents to feel they can return with their children?

What additional guidelines need to be in place in order to ensure safe practices with children (i.e., procedures for drop off and pick up; number of volunteers/staff needed to care for children who may experience more separation anxiety than usual; ensuring volunteers/staff have not been exposed to COVID-19?

What ministry can be done off-site or outside while maintain group size restrictions?

What will VBS look like this year?

How will you continue to offer online opportunities for learning and gathering?

What safety precautions must be in place before home, hospital and nursing home visitation can begin again?

What safety precautions need to be considered for transportation and church-owned vehicles?

Who will communicate different phases of startup and how will information be communicated?

What additional information do we need?

Minimum Recommendations for Safe Practices during the Yellow Phase:

- Consider suspending nursery, children and youth in-person ministries until public schools are in session.
- Daycares that have received a waiver to operate in the building must follow all guidelines.

- Homebound visitation should not resume while nursing homes, assisted living facilities and hospitals continue to be on shut-down. When resumed, respect the wishes of the family and observe all required protocols.
- Mission trips will be unwise to continue for some time. When safe to do so, consider local mission opportunities. Keep groups small following all group size restrictions, physical distancing and protocols.

CHURCH BUSINESS AND ADMINISTRATION

Who will lead this process of re-opening office operations and administration?

What is your timeline for re-evaluation and on-going care?

What is your plan for timeline and implementation for office staff to return to full operation?

How will you ensure all surfaces (phone, copier, keyboards) are cleaned after each use?

How will you create a plan for committee meetings and building rentals to return to full operation following group size limitations and physical distancing protocols?

What additional information is needed?

Minimum Recommendations for Safe Practices during the Yellow Phase:

- Staff could begin working in the office a maximum of one to two days following all physical distancing guidelines and protocols. Larger staff numbers could alternate days of work.
- Leadership teams of less than 25 could consider meeting in person wearing masks and maintaining social distancing, or continue meeting online.
- Consider allowing building use/renters in groups of less than 25 back in if they are able to observe all protocols and you are able to accommodate cleaning needs. Consider one group per day/evening.

Additional Resources:

Clergy Coaching Network: Guidance for the New Normal: <https://clergycoachingnetwork.blog/2020/04/22/guidance-for-the-new-normal/>

24 Questions Your Church Should Answer: <https://kenbraddy.com/2020/04/18/20-questions-your-church-should-answer-before-people-return/>