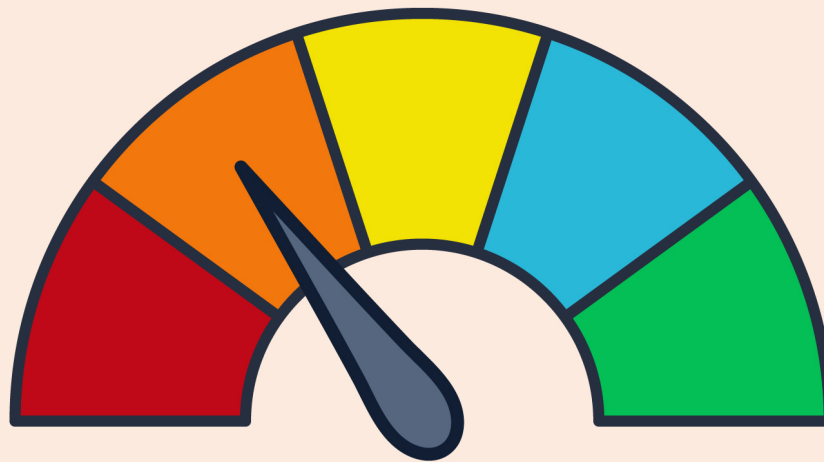




Phased Re-Gathering Plan for Churches

Current Phase: Orange



The Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church is providing this phased re-gathering plan to guide churches during the COVID-19 pandemic. A pastoral letter (<https://www.minnesotamc.org/newsdetail/letter-keeping-on-looking-ahead-14001468>) on May 22, 2020 introduced the plan introducing the plan, which takes into account the phased plan released by the Office of Gov. Tim Walz (<https://mn.gov/covid19/for-minnesotans/stay-safe-mn/stay-safe-plan.jsp>). The recommendations provided are driven by our Three Simple Rules:

- **We are a people that do no harm.** We practice physical distancing to minimize harm to others, especially the vulnerable.
- **We are a people that do all the good we can.** We care for the spiritual and physical needs of our neighbors, providing food, emotional support, and supporting our health care system.
- **We are a people that stay in love with God.** When we love God through prayer, praise, and worship, we grow in love of our neighbor. Love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable.

Our United Methodist faith communities can and must be first responders in caring for the spiritual, physical and mental health of all of God's people all across Minnesota by actualizing these Three Simple Rules. We have come to understand, like never before, that the church is not a building. It is the expression of God's love made visible through the actions of devoted followers of Jesus. We offer this plan as a framework to help church leaders make healthy and pastoral decisions, not as a fixed set of guidelines that will account for every circumstance. Although each church will need to make some decisions specific to its context and discernment, it is our expectation that every congregation will operate within each designated phase at any given time.

We are currently in the **ORANGE Phase**. Click on any of the headings below to learn more about the plan and how it was developed, and to obtain specific guidelines for each phase. Download dial graphics for use in your church communications. (https://www.dropbox.com/sh/00mwagm0zn0pv4v/AADnj_UJFPIGu0vKiaqGLjSAa?dl=0)

About the Plan

Our plan includes five phases, each of which is named according to a specific color. A few important things to know:

1. The progression from one phase to the next will occur based on guidance and recommendations from the Minnesota Department of Health and the office of Gov. Tim Walz, but it might not be linear; in other words, we might have to return to an earlier phase if the infection rate spikes and state guidelines become more restrictive. The phase we are currently in will always appear at the top of this page.
2. This is a living document and will continue to be changed and updated. The recommendations associated with each phase are based on the best information we have right now—but the COVID-19 situation is rapidly changing. The specific guidance listed below will be

modified as needed following new recommendations or guidelines shared at the state level.

3. No church will be required to gather in-person even when state guidelines permit it. Each congregation, in its own discernment process, should take into consideration the level of infection in its county, the age and vulnerability of its members, and the congregation's capacity to meet sanitation requirements within its building.
4. Churches should consider the quality of in-person worship services as they make plans to invite people to re-gather in their buildings. For as long as we won't be able to engage in some of the practices that make in-person worship so meaningful—including singing and fellowship time—the quality of the worship experience we can provide online is likely richer. Think about how to provide the best possible worship experience within the guidance of each particular phase of this plan, and make decisions accordingly.

Guiding Information

The phases and related recommendations listed below are based on the following information about COVID-19, as shared by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and/or widely understood by infectious disease experts:

- The virus that causes COVID-19 is thought to spread mainly from person to person, primarily through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, and even talks. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. Spread is more likely when people are in close contact with one another (within about six feet). Transmission of the virus can happen before people show symptoms, and some infected individuals are asymptomatic.
- In March, COVID-19 wasn't even in top 100 causes of death. Today, it's one of the leading causes of death in the U.S.
- Health experts anticipate COVID-19 will continue to be a threat until we have a vaccine or the virus has infected 60 to 70 percent of the population.

Red Phase



People are advised not to gather with anyone outside of their household, and there are restrictions on many businesses. The number of cases is high and rising, and hospital capacity is a significant concern.

Church buildings are closed. Specifically, this means:

- Churches should worship online only.
- Pastoral care visits should be done by phone or online.
- Staff, leadership team, ministry team, youth group, and other group meetings should be done virtually.
- Weddings and funerals should be postponed if at all possible. Outdoor weddings and graveside services can be conducted provided no more than 10 people are gathered and those present follow social distancing guidelines and family units remain at least six feet apart from one another. These gatherings should be live streamed when

possible to allow greater participation.

- Under state order, there can be no wedding receptions or post-funeral gatherings through Jan. 10.
- Church volunteers should cease activities that require them to leave their homes.
- Having a few people record or live stream worship from your church sanctuary is permitted. If you do this, be sure everyone in the building follows social distancing guidelines and that the number of people does not exceed 10 in compliance with Minnesota Department of Health recommendations.
- Clergy can leave their homes in order to do essential work that cannot be done remotely; they should remain at home and connect with people virtually whenever possible.

Orange Phase



Businesses can open with some restrictions. People are still encouraged to limit movement to essential needs, and remote work is still urged. Infection rates are high.

What we recommend:

Worship and life events:

- Churches are encouraged to worship online and/or through drive-up worship services—in which people gather in a parking lot without ever leaving their vehicles and with each vehicle at least six feet away from others. (For drive-up worship, people typically tune in by rolling down their windows or through an FM radio station.)
- Indoor and outdoor worship services, weddings, and funerals of up to 50 people are permitted provided that

family units are at least six feet apart and attendees wear masks (however, building capacity must not exceed 50 percent). No food or drinks may be served.

- Wedding and funeral receptions with food and drinks are limited to two households (10 people max) indoors and three households (15 people max) outdoors, per the Office of Gov. Tim Walz.
- Worship services should be live streamed as much as possible to allow greater participation.

Small groups and faith formation:

- Groups should continue to meet virtually as much as possible, and pastoral care visits should still be done by phone or online as much as possible.
- Small groups of up to 10 people are permitted to gather in-person in large, open areas—preferably outdoors—if everyone is wearing a mask, there is a minimum of six feet between each person, and the gathering area is thoroughly sanitized after each gathering (with special attention to common areas like restrooms). Small groups gathering in a church building should not sing, as singing spreads aerosols that carry the virus a substantial distance.
- High-risk individuals (those over age 60 and/or with underlying health conditions) should continue to stay home and be given options to participate in the life of the church through virtual means.

Staff and building operations:

- Church staff should work from home as much as possible. Every person who must be in the office should wear a mask at all times and engage in frequent hand-washing; staff should stagger schedules as much as possible so that multiple people are not in the office at the same time for long periods. If multiple people are coming into the office at various times, disinfect all common surfaces, including computers and phones, each time someone leaves.
- You might think about allowing building users/renters to use the building if they are able to observe gathering limits and social distancing protocols (including wearing masks) and you are able to thoroughly disinfect common spaces each time a group leaves the building. But first, consider church liability and guidelines recommended by your insurer.
- Place hand-sanitizing stations throughout your facility, including at your entrances and exits, and provide access to sanitizing wipes so people can wipe down spaces with which they come into contact.
- In preparation for increased use during the Yellow Phase (and future phases), deep clean your church building. Specifically:
 - Replace all HVAC filters and increase frequency of filter replacement.
 - Consider shampooing carpets and updating areas in need of sprucing.
 - Sanitize pews, bathrooms, doorknobs, water fountains, light switches, and microphones.
- Throughout the building and especially at entrances and high-trafficked areas, post signs indicating symptoms of COVID-19 and urging people to stay home and/or seek medical attention if they have those symptoms. Also post signs about not shaking hands, physical distancing, and greeting one another without touching—and reminders about practicing safe distancing.
- Communicate to your congregation and community the steps you are taking to prepare the church for their safe return.

Yellow Phase



Somewhat less stringent restrictions for businesses and gatherings are still in place, but remote work is still recommended. The infection rate is still a concern.

What we recommend:

Worship and life events:

- Continue holding online worship, recording from home or the sanctuary with participation from small groups of people.
- You might consider holding in-person worship but only if your space is large enough to allow for social distancing of at least six feet between each family unit and the total number of people at each service doesn't exceed 50 percent of building capacity (we recommend no more than 25 percent out of an over-abundance of caution). Have a contingency plan for overflows beyond the approved number of people. Thoroughly clean surfaces and common areas between services.
- Have people spread out in the sanctuary. Allow only one family unit per pew with measured markers indicating proper physical distance in approved and marked seating areas. Explore meeting in a fellowship hall or outdoors if your space is small.
- At children's time, children should not come forward. Instead, create from you-to-the-pew story moments engaging children from safe distancing.
- Life ritual services can be offered in more traditional ways—but funerals, weddings, and graduation and confirmation celebrations should pay careful attention to limiting guests and keeping proper physical distance.
- Groups can worship outdoors if strict social distancing (six feet on every side of each person) is maintained and attendees wear masks. The state permits no more than 50 percent of a church's building capacity to meet outside, with a maximum of 250 people, and we recommend keeping your numbers smaller than that out of an over-abundance of caution.
- High-risk individuals (those over age 60 and/or with underlying health conditions) are highly encouraged to stay home and should be given options to participate in the life of the church through virtual means.

Recommendations for those leading and attending worship during this phase:

- Ask people to wear cloth face masks while at church as is recommended in public spaces.
- Have people spread out in the sanctuary space. Allow only one family unit per pew with measured markers indicating proper physical distance in approved and marked seating areas. Explore meeting in a fellowship hall or outdoors if your space is small.
- Use no-touch alternatives for greetings and passing the peace. Consider a friendly wave, a slight bow of the head, or crossing your arms over your heart.
- Collect offering without person-to-person contact. Consider having one or more baskets around the sanctuary that people could simply place their offering into during worship or on the way out.
- Minimize the number of items that need to be touched or distributed. Consider using screens or bulletins (one-time use only) rather than Bibles, hymnals, or other worship books to avoid having multiple people touch surfaces that could carry the virus.

- Have designated individual(s) record the names of each person present, not only for attendance purposes but also should it be needed for contact tracing later on.
- Use no-touch alternatives to communion, if you choose to offer it during this phase. For example, have each person pick up a set of pre-packaged elements as they enter and remain socially distanced as they take communion in their seats, or have a masked and gloved steward place individual cups and bread in people's hands as they exit the sanctuary at the end of the service. The safe alternatives for communion might mean some congregations will choose to further postpone offering in-person communion.
- Modify baptisms so they include no skin-to-skin contact. Consider having parents hold babies and small children as the pastor performs the rite.
- Do not sing when gathered inside of your building, given that singing is considered a riskier practice when it comes to spreading aerosols that carry the virus, and cloth masks and physical distancing are unlikely to be adequate protection. Instead, think about playing pre-recorded music and asking those gathered simply to listen or to hum along. (Singing during outdoor worship is considered much safer because the aerosols dissipate much more quickly.)
- Create opportunities for fellowship time online instead of before or after worship. For everyone's safety, encourage people to leave the building as soon as worship concludes rather than mingling.
- Consider eliminating or limiting volunteer-based nursery care when you first begin in-person gatherings given that social distancing guidelines likely couldn't be followed in a nursery with young children.
- At the end of service, direct people row by row to leave the building to maintain physical distancing. The pastor should not stand at a door to greet people. If possible, have people come in through one entrance and exit through a different entrance, one family unit at a time—and think about propping open the entry and exit doors to eliminate the need for people to touch door handles.

Small groups and faith formation:

- You may offer both in-person and online opportunities for Bible studies and small groups, as well as perhaps for leadership and ministry team meetings. Try to maintain online options you established during earlier phases for at-risk populations and those who do not yet feel comfortable attending in-person.
- Do not offer in-person children's ministries, Vacation Bible School (VBS), mission trips, or lock-ins until we reach the next phase. While the risk to children and youth has been recorded as somewhat lower than other age groups, children can be asymptomatic carriers who transmit the virus to others.

Staff and building operations:

- Church staff should work from home as much as possible. If multiple staff are in the office at the same time, they should maintain physical distancing, wear masks and follow safety and sanitizing protocols.
- Consider church liability and guidelines recommended by your insurer.

Blue Phase



COVID-19 is still circulating but the infection rate is decreasing or low, and somewhat larger gatherings can take place with capacity restrictions and physical distancing requirements.

Churches will be able to open with capacity restrictions and physical distancing requirements (specific details will be added when they are released by the state). What we recommend:

- Churches offer both in-person and online worship so those with significant risk factors have the option for remote participation. Limit worship attendance in a given service to align with state guidelines, allowing for adequate spacing for people's comfort.
- You might offer in-person children's ministries and Vacation Bible School (VBS) while closely adhering to state safety guidelines and capacity limits.
- Ask people to refrain from attending any event in-person if they experience any symptoms of cold, flu, or COVID-19, or have been exposed to COVID-19 within the past 14 days.
- Continue all sanitation practices from the previous phases. All toys and materials in the nursery and children's areas should be cleaned after each use.
- Continue to use no-touch alternatives for the passing of the peace and greeting each other (including the pastor at the end of the service).
- Serve communion in individual cups and pre-cut the bread.
- Serve food on single-use dishes and with single-use serving utensils.

Green Phase

COVID-19 is no longer considered a risk, and there are no limitations on group size.

Churches can gather with no restrictions. What we recommend:

- Continue the excellent protocols for hygiene and sanitation that you developed in the earlier phases in order to do all you can to minimize illness and ensure parishioners' health and safety.
- Continue to provide multiple avenues of engagement through online and in-person gatherings in order to facilitate accessibility for all persons and to reach more people in the name of Christ.

