



June 23, 2020

Dear congregational leaders of the Presbytery of Milwaukee,

There has been increasing concern and requests for added guidance in recent weeks as congregations consider when it is wise to return to in-person worship and church activities. The Wisconsin Supreme Court decision has unfortunately left us with varying messages and guidelines when it comes to the status of the virus in our state and local areas. It has also meant that rather than one cohesive plan and phase system there are multiples, particular to counties. It has always been the case that the decision of when to return was a matter for sessions but discerning that timeline has become increasingly challenging. The Presbytery of Milwaukee still stands in agreement with official health guidelines and recommendations for phased re-entry. We also know that there is no one date that offers assurances for when to return safely other than the date we have either a vaccine for all or confidence in herd immunity, and that day has not come. In the meantime, following the health and safety guidelines of the CDC, being diligent in our tracking of COVID gating measures, and being vigilant in our planning and re-entry measures provides the safest possible course of action.

The guidance below is not intended to lend encouragement or support to returning to in-person worship or congregational gatherings at this time. It does recognize that the choice lies with each congregation and with that choice comes responsibility. Recognizing that worship and other group in-person activities pose the greatest risk for the spread of the virus, we know that we are still Safer at Home. We also know that the gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to care for the most vulnerable among us, and they happen to be those for whom this virus poses the greatest danger.

With all this in mind our recommendations to you at this point include:

- **Staying up to date with both state and county guidelines.** These change frequently. A list of links for general state guidance and the Wisconsin Department of Health COVID-19 site as well as links for similar county-based guidelines and COVID cases is included below and available on our website. Please note that not all counties will tell you what phase they are in and the number and guidelines do vary from county to county.
- **Appropriate planning for any returns to the building or in-person gatherings.** Please see the planning chart we provided earlier that is available on our website as well as the verbal and pictorial chart for safe practice dos and don'ts. These are still applicable. Also, some of our congregations represent members from multiple counties with varying statistics; these should be taken into consideration when planning.
- **We encourage every congregation to have both a plan and a covenant.** A covenant adapted from one provided by the Wisconsin Council of Churches has been provided. In addition, it will be important to have discussion and steps in place for if/when the covenant is broken.
- **Marking yourselves as a mask wearing congregation.** While social distancing is the best practice for stopping the spread of the virus, a close second is wearing a mask when out with others. We have commissioned a symbol for each of our congregations to place at their points of entry to state that they are mask wearing congregations and are providing two to

each congregation. We are also including helpful signage to coincide with the symbol. We encourage congregations to provide masks for anyone who arrives without one.

In all cases, we urge you to follow the most cautious rules or guidelines available to you. Your re-entry plan should factor in the needs of the most vulnerable and most isolated of the community, the logistical concerns of following your established plan, and the care and safety of your staff. It is also wise to consult your insurance company for their guidance.

The Wisconsin Council of Churches has been working public health officials from the beginning of the pandemic to help offer guidance to congregations. Below are some frequently asked questions and responses.

Q: Do we really need to tell our elders and vulnerable people to stay home? And the people who live with them?

A: The risk to older members of the population when they contract COVID-19 is of a significantly more severe course of illness with more complications and a higher risk of hospitalization and death. We know of similar risks for people with common health conditions like high blood pressure, diabetes, and others that reduce their immune response. People who live with them, and those who care for them, can bring the virus into the home. It is important to realize that many members of your community will have good reason to stay away from crowds for a substantial period of time. Out of love for these members, and a commitment to accessibility, we not only urge you to continue to provide remote ministries on an ongoing basis, but also consider how you might continue to normalize large group ministries gathering online for the longest time possible, and only smaller groups gathering in person, to minimize risk.

Q: We'd like to start with outdoor worship. Is that safer?

A: Outdoor worship represents a trade-off. You gain from better airflow and more ability to spread out. You do lose the assistance of sanctuary furniture to help you manage people and proximity. Make sure you have a plan for maintaining 6+ foot physical distancing, wearing cloth face coverings, and who will help ensure it is followed. A shorter time together is better than longer, and please refrain from singing for safety's sake.

Q: Is drive-in worship an option?

A: Drive-in worship does help with physical distancing. The best recommendations of our advisers are that we maintain one empty spot between cars and avoid visiting between cars. If you can't keep an empty spot between cars, make sure that everyone is masked or that car windows are closed, so there is at least a 6-foot distance between people. (As seasons pass and it gets progressively warmer, closed windows could present a safety concern unless you meet very early in the day.) A shorter time together is better than longer, and please refrain from singing.

Q: Our church is in a rural area without many cases of COVID-19. Do we really need to be this cautious?

A: You have the built-in benefit of the ability to physically distance, fresh air, and plenty of room to spread out, which is a gift! However, there are additional challenges of more limited access to medical facilities, and the exponential growth of this virus. While for a long time it might seem like there is not a major problem, exponential growth means the situation can quickly transform from looking like it is low-level and manageable to extreme in numbers. The low number of cases you have is in part a result of your success in being protective. Please keep up the good work!

Ann Gibbs, Associate for Ministry Vitality
Jean Dow, Council Moderator

State and County COVID-19 Websites (You may need to check your own local city ordinances.)

State updates and Health Site: <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/covid-19/prepare.htm>

General Guidance for all Wisconsin:

<https://www.co.dodge.wi.gov/home/showdocument?id=38812>

Dodge County: <https://www.co.dodge.wi.gov/government/departments-e-m/human-services-health-department/coronavirus-information>

<https://www.co.dodge.wi.gov/government/departments-e-m/human-services-health-department/coronavirus-information/dodge-county-safe-restart>

Kenosha County: <https://kenosha-county-covid-19-response-kenoshacounty.hub.arcgis.com/>

Milwaukee County: <https://county.milwaukee.gov/EN/COVID-19>

Racine County: <https://coronavirus-response-racinecounty.hub.arcgis.com/>

https://crchd.com/sites/default/files/2020_05_21%20CRCHD%20Recommendations%20for%20Reopening%20UPDATED%205.21.20.pdf

<https://county.milwaukee.gov/files/county/COVID-19/PhasedRe-OpeningGuidanceforMilwaukeeCountyServicesandFacilities20-13v2.pdf>

Rock County: <https://www.co.rock.wi.us/publichealth-familycommunity/publichealth-communicabledisease/coronavirus-disease-2019>

<https://infogram.com/1pe2yrqyn232dxsm6kdj6dpnyzh9m92mr9?live>

Walworth County: <https://www.co.walworth.wi.us/DocumentCenter/View/3574/Reopening-Blueprint?bidId=>

Washington Ozaukee Counties: <http://www.washozwi.gov/>

https://www.co.ozaukee.wi.us/2589/15412/County-COVID-19-Information?activeLiveTab=widgets#liveEditTab_versionsList

Waukesha County:

<https://www.waukeshacounty.gov/HealthAndHumanServices/PublicHealth/public-health-preparedness/COVID19/>

Ways to Use the Covenant

A covenant is one way to ensure your members are all on board with the same practices of care when you return to in-person worship. We have provided a covenant adapted from the Wisconsin Council of Churches which can be used as is or adapted as needed. In terms of giving weight to the covenant here are two possible ways to use the covenant; it will be important to consider how you will choose to live into the covenant (ie: enforce its practices):

- The session approves the covenant at a stated meeting and sends it to the members prior to re-turning and posts it at entry points. Those who will not abide by the covenant are asked to remain at home.
- A copy is sent to all members who send either an email agreement or mailed in signature prior to returning. A copy of the covenant with the names of all members who consented is posted at each entry. Those not willing to sign are asked to remain at home.

**A Covenant of Re-Opening to Fight Coronavirus-19 _____
Presbyterian Church of _____, Wisconsin**

We, the family of faith at _____ Presbyterian Church, follow the dual commandments to love God and to love our neighbors. Recognizing the deadly impact of the coronavirus, we covenant with each other to show our love for each other, our neighbors, and those most vulnerable to the coronavirus in the continued fight against COVID-19, even as we open our buildings for public worship, learning, mission, and use by other agencies.

- We covenant not to attend any in-person church activities if we are sick or believe we have been exposed to someone who is sick.
- We covenant to wash/disinfect our hands immediately upon entering the church building, using the soap/disinfectant for the time it takes to pray the Lord's Prayer.
- We covenant not to hug or shake hands when we are with others.
- We covenant to remain at least 6 feet apart from people with whom we are not sheltered-at-home.
- We covenant to wear face coverings to protect others in case we are sick but not showing symptoms.
- We covenant to be patient and respectful of requests made by church leaders for the safety of all.

We recognize that some members of our family of faith or visitors are at increased risk of contracting COVID-19. If we break any of these covenant agreements even innocently, it can put these beloved members and visitors at risk or force them to exclude themselves from our gatherings. Because we want everyone to be safe and included, we agree to abide by these covenants.