



PRESBYTERY of **SAN FRANCISCO**

GUIDELINE FOR RETURNING TO CHURCH

(adapted from the guidelines set forth by the Wisconsin Council of Churches)

May 22, 2020



Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.
(Genesis 12:1-2)

I came across this passage a few days ago while looking at pictures of empty San Francisco. One of the most iconic and busiest of streets in the world, the curvy Lombard Street, is now completely empty of cars and tourists. God calls Abram to leave all that he has and go to a land that God will show him. Well, we still live in our particular places in the Bay Area, but it sure does not look the same. The land and landscape of our lives have changed dramatically in the past few months. And definitely our life of faith and our church lives have also been drastically altered. After over

two months of being sheltered in, we all want and need our lives to get back to normal. We want to meet our family and friends face to face. We want to shake hands, hug each other, share communion and worship together at church. This has been a difficult time for all of us. And we do hope it happens sooner than later. But for now, we need to keep each other safe. And we need to keep our communities safe and continue to be a blessing to those around us. Our recommendation at this time would be to continue virtual worship, programs and meetings until our health department advises differently.

Recently, we have been receiving news from our Governor, Mayor, and other officials about slowly opening up our state. We know that some or many of you may want to begin discussion about ways to slowly open your church for in person gathering. For that purpose, we want to share with you some helpful guidelines for opening up our churches carefully and safely. We know we will be in this for the long haul so we offer these guidelines as a way for clergy and lay leaders to have good informed conversations and to make safe and healthy decisions for your particular church and ministry. We highly recommend consulting your local health officials and following their guidelines carefully as you journey through the several levels of opening. We also recommend contacting your insurance company for liability issues as you formulate your own path to reopening your churches.

We will continuously update these guidelines as we receive new information and we will keep you all in prayer during this time. Please contact us anytime for questions and comments you may have.

With love and care from your transitional Presbytery Staff:

Rev. InHo Kim, Partner for Congregational Vitality and Clergy Support

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A GUIDE FOR RETURNING TO CHURCH

We recommend the following baseline practices at this present level of reopening, described as Phase One as it applies to churches, who still have the designation of “non-essential”:

- Churches holding online worship services only. We recommend recording from home.
- Bible studies, small groups, etc. should be meeting online.
- Service ministries are using safety protocols and only addressing essential needs.
- Minimal drop-in staffing for essential operations (deposits, mail processing, etc).
- Continuously check with your city and state health department for their new guidelines and please follow those

When we receive permission from the Health Departments for some limited reopening of churches, which the State and Counties may consider doing in our recent Phase Two limited openings for some businesses,

We recommend:

- Churches should consider continuing to hold online worship services for some time even if some limited worship together is authorized.
- Consider resuming recording in the sanctuary, while maintaining at least 6 ft. of space between people - greater distance between those who are singing.
- Investigate options for video streaming equipment if they did not have this in place.
- Life rituals (weddings, funerals) should be kept to less than 10 in attendance. If you need to help set a limit, consider using immediate family and only publicizing date and location to those who are on the approved list to prevent hurt feelings or awkward situations.
- Bible studies and small groups continue to meet online.
- Keep office functions as limited as possible to essential operations. Those in the office should be wearing masks; if you have more than one person in the office, make sure that surfaces, including the phone, are regularly sanitized.
- Consider allowing building users/renters back in (music lessons, etc.) if they are able to observe gathering limits and distancing protocols, and you are able to accommodate the cleaning needs.
- Church sessions and leadership teams of less than 10 might consider meeting in person while wearing masks and maintaining social distancing or continue meeting online.
- High risk individuals (people over 60 and those with underlying conditions), whether staff or volunteers, should continue to shelter in place.

When more opening is allowed by the Health Departments, called Phase Three as defined by the State and Counties, we still recommend that you require careful observance of physical/social distancing recommendations on an ongoing basis.

We recommend:

Worship, depending on size:

- Churches over 50 average worship attendance (AWA): We recommend that you consider continuing to hold online worship, recording from home or the sanctuary with participation from small groups of people. If you choose to have multiple services, have a plan for managing the number of people per service. Have a plan to clean surfaces between services. Consider exploring what small group worship could look like as an alternative.
- Smaller churches (under 50 AWA) might consider holding in person worship but make sure their space is large enough to allow for social distancing. Have a contingency plan for overflows beyond the approved number of people.

General recommendations for worship in this Phase:

- Whichever alternative you choose, we recommend that you consider continuing to share worship online for some time as there will be many who are at high risk and cannot join you, or may not feel safe to return even if precautions are in place.
- Wear cloth face masks while at church, as is recommended in public spaces.
- Offering Communion safely will continue to be a challenge, as touching a face mask (to remove or shift it) contaminates it. Proximity is a risk to the minister, server and those receiving. Give serious consideration to options that minimize contact. This may mean you need to further postpone offering Communion to the faithful.
- Singing is among the riskier behaviors when it comes to spreading droplets/aerosols which can carry the virus a significant distance and remain suspended in the air. A cloth mask is unlikely to be enough to protect you or your neighbor. We recommend against singing in the sanctuary when the congregation is gathered.
- Use no-touch alternatives for passing the peace, collecting offering, and liturgical resources.
- Consider removing hymnals and Bibles if you will have multiple services. Use bulletins (do not reuse) or screens as alternatives.
- Distancing: Have people spread out in sanctuary space with one family unit per pew; keep empty pews between families. Explore meeting in a fellowship hall or outdoors if your space is small.
- We recommend against offering a fellowship/coffee hour. Continue encouraging people to leave the building rather than mingling.
- Life rituals (weddings, funerals, baptisms and confirmations) could take place in a more traditional way, with careful attention to guest lists so as to keep under the 50 person limit, and physical distancing plans.

Small Groups and Faith Formation:

- Offer opportunities for Bible studies and small groups to meet in person or online. We recommend maintaining some online options for people who do not feel comfortable.
- Don't have small groups? This is an opportunity to renew relationships and perhaps start some small groups within your congregation. As conditions shift, these small groups can provide spiritual and emotional support to one another, and offer a setting for mission.
- We recommend against offering Vacation Bible School in person. While the risk to children is somewhat lower, there is an ongoing risk of them carrying the virus back home and sharing it with other family members. Whether or not they are symptomatic, someone who is infected can spread the virus. Consider whether you might offer an online or no-touch drop-off activity.
- Similarly, we anticipate mission trips to be unwise for some time. This is an ideal time for mission in the local area. Are there food pantries or other community services in need of volunteers? Practice the art of mission in place. Keep your groups small so as not to overwhelm the ministries you serve. You are there to assist, not to occupy or divert their resources.

Church Business

- Regular office functions could resume more or less safely while maintaining social distancing and wearing masks. Continue to attend to cleaning and sanitizing the office.
- Pay particular attention to high-touch surfaces and cleaning hands after dealing with the offering.
- Church sessions and leadership teams of less than 10 might consider meeting in person while wearing masks and maintaining social distancing, or continue meeting online.

- Smaller churches (under 50 members) could consider holding in-person congregational meetings if official business is required.
- Allow building users/renters to resume operations, with a plan to address cleaning needs and agreement to observe gathering and distancing protocols.

General Building

- Post signs indicating symptoms and urging people to stay home/seek medical attention if they have symptoms.
- Maintain a good stock of tissue, soap, hand sanitizer and disposable paper towels for drying hands.
- Clean the building regularly and between user groups, paying extra attention to high-touch surfaces.
- If you become aware of someone in the church or a building user infected with COVID-19, put your communication plan into action, and cooperate fully with contact tracers.
- High risk individuals (people over 60 and those with underlying conditions), whether staff, volunteers, or program participants, should continue to shelter in place.

At the subsequent levels of openness authorized by the health Departments,

We recommend:

Consider that it is possible that conditions will not improve much, but infections may increase again. In that case, physical distancing recommendations would need to be tightened temporarily in order to get back on track. Progress will not necessarily be linear. You can help by encouraging careful hygiene, following of the physical/social distancing recommendations, encouraging people to stay at home if they have any symptoms of illness, and to cooperate with contact tracers if they are diagnosed.

- High risk individuals (people over 60 and those with underlying conditions), whether staff, volunteers, or program participants, should continue to shelter in place.
- Hospitals and care facilities may be recommended to continue limiting visitors. This has implications for church program, pastoral care and business.
- Wear cloth face masks while at church and in community ministry, as is recommended in public spaces.

Worship:

- We recommend that churches of all sizes offer in-person and remote/online options.
- Physical distancing may not be required by Phase Three opening under State and County guidelines, but we recommend that you avoid crowding in the sanctuary to the extent possible. Consider continuing to offer multiple services, as people may want to spread out.
- Watch for public health recommendations relative to Communion and group singing as we arrive at this phase. The Presbytery will monitor recommendations from State and County public health officials and offer updates.
- Continue to use no-touch alternatives for passing the peace, collecting offering, and liturgical resources. Consider removing hymnals and Bibles if you will have multiple services. Use bulletins (do not reuse) or screens as alternatives.
- We recommend against offering a fellowship/coffee hour. Continue encouraging people to leave the building rather than mingling.

- It should be safer for Bible studies and small groups to meet in person. We recommend maintaining some online options for high risk individuals and those who do not feel comfortable being in public.
- Office functions could resume as normal, with attention to cleaning.
- Groups, teams, and committees could meet in person.

Questions for Church Leadership to Consider

We offer this list of questions for Sessions to consider. We recommend that you work through these questions before any re-launch:

- Has your insurance company weighed in on benchmarks for reopening, and for operating any programs? How will these influence your decision?
- Will you maintain an online streaming option once you are back together worshipping in physical space? What adjustments will need to be made?
- How many people can your worship space hold if you are worshipping in family groups sitting 6 feet apart?
- How will you discourage the receiving line after service or congregating after worship?
- When in earlier phases of re-launch, how will you cap attendance at events so there is room for members of the community to join you and so you don't go over guidelines?
- How can you encourage small group gatherings in the earlier phases of re-launching, and how might you continue these when in-person worship resumes?
- How will you ensure sanitation and disinfection in regards to communal spaces?
 - Worship bulletin disposal, hymnals, Bibles
 - Areas where small groups gather during the week
 - Nurseries and/or playgrounds
 - Pews or chairs following worship
 - Doorknobs, bathrooms, other areas that people touch when in your building
- How will you update your building use agreements to reflect the new realities of COVID-19?
- If someone contracts COVID-19, how will you communicate with your congregation and members who may have come into contact with that individual while maintaining privacy and pastoral care?
- If someone who has been in your building contracts COVID-19, how will you do a more intensive cleaning prior to its next use?
- How will you communicate your safety plan and best practices to the congregation?

Recommended Reading/Viewing

Coronavirus/COVID-19 Resources for Congregations and Members - PCUSA

<https://www.pcusa.org/covid19/>

PCUSA – Returning to Church Guidance

https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/covid-19/returning_to_public_worship_may_2020.pdf

Center for Disease Control and Prevention – Guidance for Faith Based Organizations

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/guidance-community-faith-organizations.html>

Returning to Church - Wisconsin Council of Churches

<https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/>

24 Questions Your Church Should Ask Before People Return. Ken Braddy, Jr.
<https://kenbraddy.com/2020/04/18/20-questions-your-church-should-answer-before-people-return/>

Alameda County Public Health Department
<http://www.acphd.org>

Contra Costa Health Services
<https://www.coronavirus.cchealth.org>

San Francisco Department of Public Health
<https://www.sfdph.org/dph/alerts/coronavirus.aspx>

California Department of Public Health
<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/Immunization/ncov2019.aspx>

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(with special thanks to the San Jose Presbytery for edits to the original document)

Some further thoughts around in person gatherings as heard from a former immunologist and now presbytery exec in a mid-council gathering:

- We are going to be in this at some level until we have a vaccine which is projected to be 18-24 months out;
- Part of what scares the medical community is that they still don't understand how the virus operates and how it mutates. There is still a high level of unpredictability associated with the virus;
- They have concerns that this virus is acting like the Spanish Flu virus that mutated and had a much more lethal second wave;
- There are signs that it is mutating and affecting younger people in different ways than older people affecting the brain and causing strokes rather than affecting the lungs;
- The good news is that this is a slow mutating virus;
- They believe that somewhere between 25%-90% of the people who get this are completely asymptomatic;
- The safest thing to do with regard to worship and singing is to have "no choirs" for the next two years;
- If you do have singing, consider duets rather than a choir and a plastic shield in front of singers;
- The virus hangs in the air. A cough transports the virus 12'-15'. A singing voice transports the virus up to 20';
- If you hold services gloves and masks should be required;
- Consider holding multiple services in order to hold the number of worshippers down;
- Don't have anything that requires touch that remains in the sanctuary: Bibles, pencils, envelopes, brochures, etc.
- Don't hold fellowship or coffee hour. Don't do anything with food, passing of communion or offering plates;
- If possible, have dedicated cleaners to disinfect bathrooms;
- Use the six-foot rule in bathrooms having marked standing spots in the hallways;
- Don't use air conditioners;
- Try to keep windows and doors open;