Guidelines for Returning to Church Gatherings (May 4, 2020)

Proverbs 28:2 offers wisdom for this chaotic and anxious period:

When the country is in chaos, everybody has a plan to fix it – But it takes a leader of real understanding to straighten things out. (The Message)

As churches prepare to return to church Bible study and worship gatherings, our first imperative is “do no harm.” Instead of providing a list of dos and don’ts we offer a series of questions as conversation starters and guidelines for pastors and laity. This is an opportunity to empower and involve laity in discussions and decision-making to be the church God is calling us to be. Questions are grouped into three categories: Logistics, Learnings, and Leading. It will be helpful to have teams to address these questions, rather than have one person deal with everything.

**Logistics:** These questions involve how to prepare to reopen the church property and keep laity and clergy safe and well. Your Trustees, worship, children’s ministry and hospitality teams may be most engaged in these discussions. If you have health professionals in your congregation, ask them to provide input to this conversation.

**Learnings:** These questions relate to what you’ve learned and experienced in your response to the pandemic and what will be beneficial ministries to maintain now and in the future. Congregational care teams, education teams, small group leaders, and the pastoral staff team will likely be involved with these plans.

**Leading:** These questions are visionary, designed to propel your congregation forward as both a “gathered” and “distributed” church when it becomes possible to hold worship both in person and virtually. It will take several weeks and multiple discussions to consider the implications of the pandemic on your church’s future ministry.

Please share your plans with your Conference Superintendent as you work through these guidelines. If you have specific considerations or situations not addressed in these resources, please contact your superintendent.

**Logistics:**
- Who will stay on top of recommendations and executive orders to ensure compliance when opening can occur?
  - Federal guidelines
    - [https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/](https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/)
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- State guidelines and checklists – pay particular attention to the “Back on Track” PDF for places of worship below:
  - [https://www.coronavirus.in.gov/](https://www.coronavirus.in.gov/)
- Local health department guidelines [https://www.in.gov/isdh/24822.htm](https://www.in.gov/isdh/24822.htm)
- Bishop/Indiana guidelines ([add inumc.org URL here when available](https://www.inumc.org))

- What needs to happen for your church to reopen as safely as possible?
  - What adjustments will you need to make with fewer workers, finances, and property utilizing social distancing?
  - How will you protect the most vulnerable populations as you make decisions?
  - In the event someone in your congregation tests positive, how will you inform the congregation (without disclosing the person’s name) and local health department, so they can initiate contact tracing and testing?

- Who will consult with your insurance provider for guidelines regarding liability and building security?

- What will you do to address questions and topics raised in the five stages for reopening recommended by the Indiana government? [https://backontrack.in.gov/2348.htm](https://backontrack.in.gov/2348.htm)

- How will you communicate your reopening safety and hygiene plans to church members and your community?

  - Hospitality team – how will you instruct them regarding masks and gloves, hand-shaking, social distancing, receiving offering, etc.?
  - Cleaning supplies:
    - Where and how can you get enough supplies if shortages occur?
    - How will you ensure that you have enough supplies and assistance to thoroughly clean the worship and other spaces in between worship services?
  - What will you decide about congregational singing (not recommended according to CDC because of airborne particle spread), choirs, greeting time, serving communion, etc.?

Learnings:

- What is your definition of church and how has it changed over the past two months?
- What have you learned about your congregation during this time of social distancing?
- What ministries have you begun during the stay-at-home order that you want to maintain and improve going forward?
- What will you discontinue so that you can focus your church’s energy to be as fruitful as possible as missional disciples?
- What has your church gained during this time – socially, missionally, and spiritually?
- Who else can provide additional information you need to consider before reopening?
- What is possible now that did not seem possible before the COVID-19 pandemic?
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Leading:

“What if we see this season as a chance to lay the groundwork for transitioning from the dominant model of ministry being done by ministry professionals to a more robust (and biblical) model of leaders equipping, blessing, and sending the people of our church communities to do the work of ministry in their families, on their blocks, and in their neighborhoods?” (Fresh Expressions US)

- What does your new missional vision need to be for your church?
- What elements are essential and need to be implemented to be a disciple-making, missional church in your context?
- What will it look like for your church to gather and disperse for the foreseeable future?
- How will you shepherd, disciple, and extend care to your virtual congregation and to people who may not yet feel comfortable returning to public gatherings when you return to gathering in your building?
- How will you encourage small group and house church gatherings to be implemented and continued after you resume large gatherings?
- How will you encourage your pastoral staff and lay leaders to care for themselves beyond the immediate crisis?
- What would it look like for your church to relaunch its ministry when you come out of this season – rebranding, inviting the community, welcoming online participants onsite, offering new ministries, etc.?

Additional resources to consult and ideas to consider in planning for reopening:

https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/#guidelines

https://www.gcfa.org/about-us/resources-during-covid-19/ (GCFA guidance for virtual attendance, etc.)

Other North Central Jurisdiction conference guidelines:

Other inter-denominational resources and guidelines:
- Wisconsin Council of Churches
- Indiana Center for Congregations
- https://digitaltheology.us/covid-19-work
- https://freshexpressionsus.org/distributedchurch
- Lifeway: 24 questions Ken Braddy blog