

Northern Ohio District

Considerations for Re-Opening During Covid-19 Pandemic

HOW IS THE VIRUS SPREAD?

1. In air transmission—the virus particles can be found and transmitted for 2–3 hours in the air.
2. On surfaces—the virus particles can be found and thus transmitted for 2–5 days on various surfaces.
3. The Covid-19 virus surface can be broken down by soap and water or alcohol or disinfectant.
4. Inside building factors that increase risk of virus transmission: air conditioning, sealed windows, or conditions that encourages recycling of air within a small area.
5. Close proximity to a person who is infected.
6. A person can generate and transmit the virus for days before showing any symptoms.
7. A person can be infected, have no symptoms, and still generate and transmit the virus.
8. A person who is symptomatic has a high likelihood of transmitting virus.
9. People with coronavirus infection expel the virus when they talk or sing or even just sit in a pew breathing.
10. The likelihood of one person in a small group having the virus is low, but if there is one infected person in the group the likelihood of others becoming infected is high.
11. The larger the group, more likely someone in the group may have the virus.

FACTORS OF WORSHIP TOGETHER LIKELY TO INCREASE THE RISK OF TRANSMISSION

1. Multiple people touching something—the virus can be picked up through people touching the same item and then touching mouth, nose, or a cut.
2. Multiple people in same room regardless of proximity.
3. Close proximity to other people.
4. The risk increases as more people are in the same room. Each person brings the risk of the number of people with whom they have been in contact. The risk to persons who live together also increases.
5. The risk increases with longer times in proximity.
6. Singing increases likelihood of in-air transmission: Congregational singing and choral music are particularly risky activities when it comes to the spread of Covid-19, these elements of worship should be omitted when churches first return to public worship.

SUGGESTED TRANSMISSION MITIGATION MEASURES DURING WORSHIP

1. Planning Basics

- a. Choosing a date. Allow ample time to plan to worship in a way that reduces the risk of transmission.
 - The State of Ohio still recommends no gatherings of groups more than 10 and that churches “Hold remote/online meetings for gatherings, including regular religious services and holiday/special services.”
 - “If any in-person services must be held, implement practices to keep all people, including staff and volunteers, 6 feet apart. Refrain from practices that involve the sharing/passing of common items or close contact with other individuals. Discourage people over 60 from attending. Ask members to refrain from shaking hands and hugging. Provide adequate supplies of soap and water, hand sanitizer, and disinfecting wipes.”
- b. Choose location where social distancing can be maintained. Would the Fellowship Hall work better than the sanctuary? Are outside services a possibility?
- c. Begin with worship only (no Sunday School) to decrease the time in proximity and the need for use of common space like restrooms.
- d. Offer additional times for worship in order to accommodate multiple small groups, rather than a single larger assembly.
- e. Reduce people allowed in one inside room at a time to reduce risk of in-air transmission.
- f. Arrange chairs or mark pews so that household groups are spaced at least 6 feet apart. Members of a household can sit together.
- g. No beverages, snacks, or meals should be provided (carry-in dinners will need to wait awhile...)
- h. Keep accurate attendance records in case contact tracing becomes necessary. (Assign someone to record attendance – do not pass attendance sheet to be signed)
- i. Insurance considerations
 - Call your insurance company to share your plans for reopening.
 - Check your policy to see if there is an exclusion for viral or communicable disease.

2. Gathering

- a. All persons should wear face coverings over mouth and nose.
 - Have clean masks available if someone is without personal protective equipment.
 - Face mask: tight weave cotton cloth, medical grade cloth, two or more layers, inserts.
- b. No hugging or handshaking or touching other persons; even fist or elbow bumps do not allow for social distancing and should be avoided.
- c. Children should remain with their families at all times. Children’s stories can be presented without inviting children to the front of the church.
- d. Reduce or discontinue singing as it may increase risk of transmitting virus as airborne particles. Feature instrumental music and find other ways for worshipers to participate in musical offerings:

for instance, humming with masks on, clapping or moving in rhythm, or using small percussion instruments. Responsive readings should also be avoided.

- e. Plans should be made so that microphones are not shared.
 - How will you handle “joys and concerns” if you usually pass a microphone around?
 - Microphones should be wiped cleaned before and after use.
- f. Provide additional time and coordination for gathering and sending so people can do so in a way that minimizes close contact; block doors open to reduce contact with handles.

3. Reduce items that need to be touched.

- a. Door handles—can they be left open or made to open without touch?
- b. Papers, hymn books, and objects—what can be reduced?
- c. Can communion be postponed? If provided, how can the elements be safely provided?
- d. Discourage use of water fountains. Encourage people to bring a bottle of water for their own use if necessary.
- e. Restrooms should be for emergency use only.
- f. Provide hand sanitizer and/or hand-washing stations in convenient, accessible places.

4. Increased Hygiene

- a. If possible, rearrange gathering, passage, and seating spaces in a way that allows for physical distancing to continue (although households may group more closely together).
- b. Provide hand sanitizer and/or hand-washing stations in convenient, accessible places.
- c. Reduce nonessential items from common spaces, eliminating surfaces of contact.
- d. Use projection, if possible, to reduce contact with printed worship aids and books.
- e. Clean high-touch surfaces regularly and frequently, before/after each service of worship.
- f. Routinely clean and disinfect surfaces and objects that are frequently touched. This may include cleaning objects/surfaces not ordinarily cleaned daily (e.g., doorknobs, light switches, handrails, backs of pews, sink handles, countertops).

5. Offering/Financial Considerations

- a. Develop and promote opportunities for electronic contributions, particularly for the sake of those who are worshipping at home or joining the congregation’s worship from a distance through online services.
- b. Encourage worshipers to mail checks.
- c. Make baskets for the offering available in prominent places (near the doors of the church or in a center aisle) to avoid the need for passing plates. Remind worshipers about this opportunity.
- d. Provide suggestions for how members might use their time and talents for the benefit of those who are struggling with illness, isolation, or loss of income.

6. Dismissal

- a. Have a plan for the orderly dismissal of the congregation to maintain social distancing. (For example, have the last rows leave first, then second to last row, and so forth; encourage ushers to direct the process.)
- b. Block doors open to reduce contact with doorknobs and handles and/or encourage greeters and ushers to hold doors open for worshipers to reduce contact.
- c. No close socializing in groups in narthex or parking lot.

COMMUNICATION IS ESSENTIAL!

1. Work together with your church leadership to develop a plan and to clearly communicate that plan to your congregation.
2. **Make sure all are aware that things will be different as you gather.**
3. Communicate clearly that the expectation is that those in high risk categories will not attend.
4. Communicate that anyone that is sick or has been exposed to COVID-19 should/must stay home.
5. Continue to offer on-line and recorded options for worship.
6. Involve the deacons and others in staying in contact with those that cannot or choose not to attend.
7. **Call your congregation to prayer!**
8. Encourage compassion and care for each other – especially those that react to the crisis in different ways.

“...in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” Philippians 2:3-4

Adapted from the following resources: *Returning to Public Worship (Presbyterian Church USA)*; *CDC Document - Interim Guidance for Administrators and Leaders of Community- and Faith-Based Organizations to Plan, Prepare, and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)*; *Ohio Citizens For Community Values Document – Guidelines For Re-engaging in Public Religious Gatherings*; *Kathryn Jacobsen, PhD in Messenger Magazine 5/15/2020, State of Ohio coronavirus website..* With thanks to Middle PA District Executive Dave Banaszak.