

Coming Back to the Heart of Worship

Illinois Great Rivers Conference Guidance on Safely Gathering

As we continue to minister with and serve our communities during the COVID-19 global pandemic, we are seeing our churches transform and adapt in amazing ways. When faced with the specter of this disease, the United Methodists of the Illinois Great Rivers Conference have innovated and adjusted their ministries to continue to proclaim in word and action the good news of Christ's love and the healing power of God's grace. Now, we are beginning to plan for how we will continue our ministries when it will be safer to gather people in our communities and church buildings. This document is intended to provide assistance and guidance to church leaders as they consider their ministries. Our goal, in all things, is to follow the Lord of Life as we do all in our power to ensure that our communities and congregations are healthy and well.

Why and How Do We Worship?

In 1997 Matt Redman, the prolific and popular worship music composer, joined a challenge from the pastor of his church. As worship leaders, they had become concerned that worship was becoming too focused on the performance of the musicians and preacher and not enough focused on the participatory worship of the congregation. Together they determined that they would stop their regular worship experiences for a season and refocus on the core purposes and practices of worship. During the time that the congregation was simply gathering for shared testimony and prayer, Matt Redman wrote the popular worship song "The Heart of Worship" to describe his hopes and prayers of what it would be like to return to a fuller worship experience. He wrote:

*When the music fades, all is stripped away, and I simply come,
Longing just to bring something that's of worth that will bless your heart.
I'll bring you more than a song, for a song in itself is not what you have required.
You search much deeper within, through the way things appear;
You're looking into my heart.
I'm coming back to the heart of worship, and it's all about you; it's all about you, Jesus.
I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing I've made it, when it's all about you; it's all about you, Jesus.*

During the last few months as it has been unsafe for groups of people to gather, churches across the world have been asking themselves similar questions about what makes up the heart of their worship gatherings. The necessary pause has invited church leaders to innovate new worship practices, new ways of connecting people to each other and to God, new ways of telling the good news of Christ's salvation, and new ways of offering praise and prayer.

As we begin to prepare for a gradual easing of public health safety practices, some churches will want to quickly return to the previous traditions and habits of their worship. We know, however, that we cannot simply restart everything that we've done before. These guidelines

offer the best available direction on keeping our congregations and communities safe. We're following the guidance provided by public health officials in the Restore Illinois Plan. You can find the details of phased easing of safety practices in the later sections of this document, but some things to initially consider are:

- We likely won't be gathering people into groups larger than 10 for quite a while, and even then we won't be gathering people into groups larger than 50 until our communities are clear of COVID-19 or there is a widespread and effective treatment.
- Social distancing practices of wearing masks, keeping six feet apart, and avoiding interpersonal contact will continue to be the norm.
- People over 65 years old, those with compromised immunity, those with respiratory illness or injury, or others who are at a higher risk of dying from COVID-19 will want to remain isolated and avoid gatherings of any size until they are given the all-clear.

Given these general precautions, most of our churches should not simply return to their previous patterns and practices of worship. We must, instead, focus on how we can worship safely and in new ways. In John 4:24, when the Samaritan woman questioned Jesus about the changing worship practices of her day, he reminded her that "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." In this moment, leaders of worship in our churches are being invited to rethink and re-envision their worship practices so that all of the people of our congregations and communities can be invited to worship God in spirit and truth.

Some churches are already beginning this re-planning and re-engagement with how they will gather people for worship in order to provide a powerful, encouraging, and engaging experience that offers praise, prayer, and thanksgiving to God. Some of their ideas include:

- Continuing to offer online or other broadcast worship experiences for those who are at high-risk and cannot safely gather in person.
- Setting up house or neighborhood small group worship experiences, so people can gather more safely in groups of less than 10.
- Offering drive-in worship, where worshippers remain in their vehicles.
- Offering daily worship experiences for smaller groups throughout the week.
- Remaining solely online, and not offering in person worship experiences until they can safely gather their entire congregation.

In this time of preparation and planning, our church leaders are being invited to consider how and why they gather for worship. What is at the heart of your church's worship? And how can that be done safely for all people? Many of our churches have worked hard at following the Spirit's promptings to reach out in new ways through new means to their congregations and communities. What have you learned from this? And how will you continue to serve those whom you've newly engaged through your new practices? The Spirit is blessing our church leaders with new tongues of technology to speak to new generations. How will we continue to practice the new skills that we have learned?

Process for Using this Guidance:

Don't use this guidance alone. Given the significant changes needed to gather safely, churches will want to have a team of people learning, discerning, and leading together. This team should be led by the pastor and might include worship leaders, building staff, trustees, pastor-parish relations committee members, the lay leader, children's ministry leaders, and a couple of innovative thinkers who can help with strategy. This team could be a special series of meetings of the Administrative Council and invited guests. The goal of the team is to create a covenant of common safety understandings that the congregation will practice in order to keep themselves, their families, their neighbors, their community, and their region as safe as possible.

Your leadership team should begin to immediately convene conversations that focus on these three key questions:

- Why do we gather for worship, discipleship-formation, or fellowship?
- What is at the heart of our worship?
- How can we make gatherings in our buildings as safe as possible?
- Knowing that we cannot make our gatherings absolutely safe for everyone, (a) which gatherings will we choose not to have, (b) which will we choose to provide alternative ways for participation, and (c) to which gatherings will we limit invitations for participation?
- How will we inform, educate, and encourage safe participation from our congregation?
- How will we respond to people who do not understand or refuse to practice our group safety practices?

This document provides many guidelines and recommendations, but local church leaders should not consider this an exhaustive listing of all cautions. In addition to this guidance, local church leaders should pay close attention and comply with federal, state, and local public health officials. **This guidance will change and be updated periodically as new information or public health guidelines become available.** Finally, local church leaders should be in contact with and follow any additional guidance provided by your local church insurance provider, especially when it comes to limiting any potential liabilities.

Principles

This document includes specific guidance on many ministry practices and facilities usages, but all of these are derived from these principles, which can be used to evaluate questions arising beyond the details of this document:

1) Do no harm

The first rule of a Methodist is "Do no harm." Our churches should attempt to minimize harm as much as possible. This will likely require inconveniencing many people in order to make it safer for some other people. In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, this means that we must do all we can to keep people as safe as possible, even if it is

difficult, inconvenient, frustrating, unprofitable, or disruptive. Some people are at higher risk of dying from COVID-19, but it has the possibility of killing anyone who contracts it. Doing no harm, in this case, means keeping people from dying.

2) Avoid close individual contact

The coronavirus that causes COVID-19 is primarily spread by water droplets carried on the breath of someone with the virus. It is also possible for someone to have the virus for several weeks without showing any symptoms or even being aware that they could be spreading the virus to others. Avoiding close contact between people can significantly lower the possibility of someone unknowingly infecting another person. People should remain at least six feet apart (about the length of regular breath transmission) and wear masks to prevent water vapor traveling between people. People who suspect they might have COVID-19, people who are ill, or people at higher risk of dying from COVID-19 should avoid contact with any other people.

3) Avoid shared object contact

Water droplets containing the virus can easily pass from mouth to hand to objects to another person who touches that object and then their mouth, face, or eyes. There is still a lot unknown about how long the virus can be contagious once it gets onto an object, but the best practice is to limit touching of common objects. This includes door handles, handrails, bathroom fixtures, bulletins, toys, coffee pots, hymnals, microphones, keyboards, and cleaning supplies. Shared objects should be thoroughly cleaned between usages (for instructions see: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/disinfecting-your-home.html>).

4) Rule of the Least Compliant Person

Because of the nature of viral transmission, the safety level of a group of people is not set by the safety practices of the majority of the group's participants. Instead, the safety level of the entire group is set by the safety practices of the least safe person in the group. One person who does not follow safety practices can infect an entire group, even if the rest of the group is fully complying with all recommended safety practices. This means that church gatherings will need to clearly communicate with all of their participants the mutual needs of the entire gathering to reduce risk.

Restore Illinois Plan Phases

As we consider our church gatherings, we will need to pay attention to various levels of community risk and possible exposure to the virus that causes COVID-19. On May 5, 2020, the State of Illinois released its Restore Illinois plan that describes five phases of safety precautions. The full plan is available from [the state coronavirus site](#), and it describes the phases this way:

- 1) **Phase 1 – Rapid Spread:** *The rate of infection among those tested and the number of patients admitted to the hospital is high or rapidly increasing. Strict stay at home and social distancing guidelines are put in place and only essential businesses remain open.*

Every region has experienced this phase once already, and could return to it if mitigation efforts are unsuccessful.

- 2) ***Phase 2 – Flattening:*** *The rate of infection among those tested and the number of patients admitted to the hospital beds and ICU beds increases at an ever slower rate, moving toward a flat and even a downward trajectory. Nonessential retail stores reopen for curbside pickup and delivery. Illinoisans are directed to wear a face covering when outside the home and can begin enjoying additional outdoor activities like golf, boating and fishing while practicing social distancing. To varying degrees, every region is experiencing flattening as of early May.*
- 3) ***Phase 3 – Recovery:*** *The rate of infection among those surveillance tested, the number of patients admitted to the hospital, and the number of patients needing ICU beds is stable or declining. Manufacturing, offices, retail, barbershops and salons can reopen to the public with capacity and other limits and safety precautions. Gatherings limited to 10 people or fewer are allowed. Face coverings and social distancing are the norm.*
- 4) ***Phase 4 – Revitalization:*** *The rate of infection among those surveillance tested and the number of patients admitted to the hospital continues to decline. Gatherings of 50 people or fewer are allowed, restaurants and bars reopen, travel resumes, child care and schools reopen under guidance from the Illinois Department of Public Health. Face coverings and social distancing are the norm.*
- 5) ***Phase 5 – Illinois Restored:*** *With a vaccine or highly effective treatment widely available or the elimination of any new cases over a sustained period, the economy fully reopens with safety precautions continuing. Conventions, festivals and large events are permitted, and all businesses, schools and places of recreation can open with new safety guidance and procedures in place reflecting the lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Be aware that these levels will likely change multiple times until there is an effective and available vaccine or treatment. These will be implemented according to local conditions within eleven regions based on the State of Illinois Emergency Medical Services regions.

Our Illinois Great Rivers Conference has members and churches in several of these regions, and we are expecting that we will have different churches utilizing different safety practices based on the public health guidance for their region. Regions are primarily determined by counties, and you can find your region on the map provided by the Restore Illinois plan:

1. **NORTH:** Boone, Carroll, DeKalb, Jo Daviess, Lee, Ogle, Stephenson, Whiteside, Winnebago
2. **NORTH-CENTRAL:** Bureau, Fulton, Grundy, Henderson, Henry, Kendall, Knox, La Salle, Livingston, Marshall, McDonough, McLean, Mercer, Peoria, Putnam, Rock Island, Stark, Tazewell, Warren, Woodford
3. **WEST-CENTRAL:** Adams, Brown, Calhoun, Cass, Christian, Greene, Hancock, Jersey, Logan, Macoupin, Mason, Mason, Menard, Montgomery, Morgan, Pike, Sangamon, Schuyler, Scott
4. **METRO EAST:** Bond, Clinton, Madison, Monroe, Randolph, St. Clair, Washington
5. **SOUTHERN:** Alexander, Edwards, Franklin, Gallatin, Hamilton, Hardin, Jackson, Jefferson, Johnson, Marion, Massac, Perry, Pope, Pulaski, Saline, Union, Wabash, Wayne, White, Williamson
6. **EAST-CENTRAL:** Champaign, Clark, Clay, Coles, Crawford, Cumberland, De Witt, Douglas, Edgar, Effingham, Fayette, Ford, Iroquois, Jasper, Lawrence, Macon, Moultrie, Piatt, Richland, Shelby, Vermillion
7. **SOUTH SUBURBAN:** Kankakee, Will
8. **WEST SUBURBAN:** DuPage, Kane
9. **NORTH SUBURBAN:** Lake, McHenry
10. **SUBURBAN COOK:** Suburban Cook
11. **CHICAGO:** City of Chicago



Information about the conditions, criteria, and status of each region can be found at the Illinois Department of Public Health page: <http://www.dph.illinois.gov/regionmetrics>.

Summary Chart of Church Guidance for Each Phase

This chart presents a general overview of the major safety guidance for our churches during each phase. This overview chart is to help orient church leaders to the detailed guidance offered in the rest of this document.

Phase 1: RAPID SPREAD

- Churches should not gather for in person weekly worship
- Funerals and Weddings should be less than 10 people
- Church buildings closed, except for essential and minimum basic operations.

Phase 2: FLATTENING

- Same as Phase 1
- Churches may gather for Drive In worship services

Phase 3: RECOVERY

- Churches may gather for any purpose in groups of less than 10
- **Churches may gather out of doors with proper distancing**
- Children's ministry programs should not be held
- Social distancing, face masks, and other precautions should be taken
- **Churches should not practice group singing**
- Church buildings may reopen to small groups, and all church staff and volunteers can return to using the building
- People at higher risk of dying from COVID-19 should not gather in groups of any size.

Phase 4: REVITALIZATION

- Churches may gather for any purpose in groups of less than 50
- **Churches with larger rooms may gather indoor groups of up to 25% of the room capacity, but may not exceed 100 people in total**
- Children's ministry programs may resume, cautiously
- Continue social distancing practices and other precautions

Phase 5: ILLINOIS RESTORED

- Churches may gather in unlimited size groups for any purpose
- It is now safer for people of higher risk of dying from COVID-19 to gather

Actions to Combat a Resurgence of COVID-19

- Mitigation actions may increase if there is a regional outbreak according to the criteria established by the Illinois Department of Public Health.
- Outbreak mitigation actions are set in tiers that correspond to phase recommendations: Tier 1 = Phase 3, Tier 2 = Phase 2, and Tier 3 = Phase 1.
- Please follow local media and IGRC communications for tier change announcements.

PHASE 1: RAPID SPREAD

General Guidance from Restore Illinois Plan:

- Stay at home order and social distancing in place
- Essential gatherings, such as religious services, of 10 or fewer allowed
- No non-essential gatherings of any size.
- Non-essential travel discouraged
- Schools in remote learning
- Child care in groups of 10 or fewer for essential workers
- Employees of “non-essential” businesses are required to work from home except for Minimum Basic Operations

Illinois Great Rivers Conference Guidance:

- 1) Churches of any size should not meet for regular worship services in person. Churches should move to online, teleconference, or broadcast worship services only. Essential religious services are deemed to only include funerals or weddings that cannot be rescheduled.
- 2) Churches may record their service for broadcast from their building, while maintaining appropriate social distancing and involving less than 10 people. This includes wearing masks when in public places and staying six feet from other people. Pay special attention that worship leaders keep appropriate distancing. This is particularly important as the singing and speaking of the leaders can lead to viral transmission much further than six feet. At no times should there be group singing in enclosed spaces, when people are within six feet of each other, when people are facing each other, or in the presence of an audience or congregation. Singing creates a special risk, and worship leaders should be notified of this risk and take extraordinary precautions to avoid possible viral transmission. Safest practice is for singing to be done by individuals in separate rooms and edited together for broadcast.
- 3) Wedding services should be postponed if possible or be kept to less than 10 people in attendance, including the officiants and any other professions (such as wedding coordinator, photographer, musicians). If you need to help set a limit, consider only inviting immediate family. We advise only publicizing the date and location to those who are on the approved list to prevent hurt feelings or awkward situations.
- 4) Funerals should be limited to graveside services with less than 10 people in attendance (including officiant, funeral director, and cemetery staff). Encourage the scheduling of a memorial service either on-line or at a later date. No funeral meals or receptions should be held or hosted by the church.
- 5) Church food banks, food pantries, and feeding ministries are “essential” functions, and they should continue while following all public health precautions, safe food-handling precautions, and high levels of social distancing. Volunteers who at higher-risk of dying from COVID-19 should not participate, and new volunteers might need to be recruited.
- 6) Committees, leadership teams, Bible studies, and other small groups should not meet in person and continue to meet online or through conference call.

- 7) Keep office functions as limited minimum basic 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.
- 8) Check with your insurance carrier to see if they have any particular guidelines for your church to follow.
- 9) If you are considering allowing building users or renters into the church facilities for their minimum basic operations work, ensure that they observe gathering limits, safety procedures including mask usage, distancing protocols, and that church personnel are able to accommodate cleaning needs. Consider church liability as you make this decision and any guidelines your insurer might recommend.
- 10) **People over 65 years old, those with compromised immunity, those with respiratory illness or injury, others who are at a higher risk of dying from COVID-19, those who have tested positive for COVID-19, and those who have been exposed to someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 in the last 14 days should continue to remain isolated and avoid gatherings of any size until they are given the all-clear. This includes church staff, volunteers, parishioners, visitors, renters, facility users, and guests. Church staff and clergy who are at high risk should have a conversation with their supervisor, Pastor-Parish Relations Committee, or District Superintendent to seek appropriate accommodation.**

PHASE 2: FLATTENING

General Guidance from Restore Illinois Plan:

- Stay at home order and social distancing in place
- Face coverings must always be worn when social distancing is not possible
- Essential gatherings, such as religious services, of 10 or fewer allowed
- No non-essential gatherings of any size.
- Non-essential travel discouraged
- Schools in remote learning
- Child care in groups of 10 or fewer for essential workers
- Employees of “non-essential” businesses are required to work from home except for Minimum Basic Operations

Illinois Great Rivers Conference Guidance:

- 1) Churches should follow Phase 1 Illinois Great Rivers Conference Guidance except as changed in this list.
- 2) Drive In Worship Services are permitted within these guidelines:
 - a) Coordinate with your local law enforcement and public health officials to determine permission, guidance, or additional safety recommendations.
 - b) Utilize hospitality volunteers or signage to direct parking. Do not have people stop and converse with each other as they enter.
 - c) Everyone, including volunteers, staff, and clergy, must follow social distancing guidelines at all times. This includes, wearing masks in public and staying six feet

- from other people. Pay special attention that worship leaders keep appropriate distancing. This is particularly important as the singing and speaking of the leaders can lead to viral transmission much further than six feet. These practices should continue until the region enters Phase 5 (Illinois Restored). Safest practice includes broadcasting the worship service via FM radio or wifi streaming, and extra caution must be exercised if the worship service is simply amplified to worshippers listening in their vehicles.
- d) People who live together should be the only ones who travel together, without introducing new people to the vehicle, stopping to pick up someone else, or have people from outside of their household in their vehicle.
 - e) No one should leave vehicles for any reason. Do not open tailgates or sit near vehicle in folding chairs. Worshippers should stay in their vehicle. It is safest to leave windows up and closed, but this might not be possible in all situations. Please share this caution with any worshippers.
 - f) In Phase 2, the church building should remain closed. This includes the restrooms. Please do not have worshippers in the church building for any purpose. In Phase 3, restroom facilities in the church building may be used. Arrange for a volunteer to clean the facility regularly and monitor that people keep social distances as they enter and exit the building and facilities. Facilities may be fully opened in Phase 4, but they will need to be maintained, monitored, and sanitized regularly.
 - g) Park every other spot, keeping a car width (at least six feet) between vehicles. Discourage participants from hanging out windows or yelling between cars. Coronavirus is most commonly spread through respirated water droplets, which can travel up to six feet with regular breathing. Singing, shouting, or talking loudly can send respirated water vapor much, much further.
 - h) No one should exchange anything, including passing out bulletins and hymnals or passing the offering plate. Participants should not “just drop this off” to another person while they are at worship.
 - i) Communion should not be practiced during drive-in worship during Phase 2. Communion may be practiced with no-touch precautions in later phases, according to instructions and precautions in those phases.
 - j) Continue to provide a non-contact worship option for congregants who determine that it is not safe for them to participate in Drive In worship.
 - k) In advance, have church leaders determine how they will respond to promote group safety if participants do not follow these guidelines.
- 3) This is the time to prepare your church facility for possible reuse:
- a) Deep clean your entire church. Although unoccupied spaces are unlikely to still harbor contagious amounts of the virus, a thoroughly cleaned space will provide additional confidence to your congregation and facility users. Make sure that cleaning staff and volunteers are practicing appropriate social distancing, wearing masks, and practicing exceptional cleanliness.
 - b) Replace all air filters (furnace, air conditioning, air cleaner devices) and increase frequency of filter replacement.

- c) Sanitize pews, bathrooms, doorknobs, water fountains, light switches, and microphones. Provide access to sanitizing wipes so folks can wipe down spaces with which they come in contact.
 - d) Pay special attention to the nursery/preschool/children’s areas. While it will likely be some time before these spaces are open again for use, this level of care is deeply appreciated by families. Use this time to remove worn/broken toys and other clutter.
 - e) Make and post signs about not shaking hands, physical distancing, and doing non-contact greetings. Post reminders and ways of practicing safe distancing at all entrances and throughout your building. Post these reminders above water fountains, in restrooms and other high traffic areas.
- 4) Communicate all of these activities and precautions to your congregation and community. Tell your congregation and community how you are preparing the church for their return, especially your efforts to provide a safe, clean, and comfortable facility.
- 5) People over 65 years old, those with compromised immunity, those with respiratory illness or injury, others who are at a higher risk of dying from COVID-19, those who have tested positive for COVID-19, and those who have been exposed to someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 in the last 14 days should continue to remain isolated and avoid gatherings of any size until they are given the all-clear. This includes church staff, volunteers, parishioners, visitors, renters, facility users, and guests. Church staff and clergy who are at high risk should have a conversation with their supervisor, Pastor-Parish Relations Committee, or District Superintendent to seek appropriate accommodation.**

PHASE 3: RECOVERY

General Guidance from Restore Illinois Plan:

- Face coverings in public continue to be required
- All gatherings of 10 people or fewer are allowed with this limit subject to change based on latest data and guidance
- Travel should follow state and federal public health approved guidance
- Schools in remote learning
- Limited child care and summer programs open with Department of Public Health approved safety guidance
- Employees of “non-essential” businesses are allowed to return to work with Department of Public Health approved safety guidance depending upon risk level, tele-work strongly encouraged wherever possible
- Employers are encouraged to provide accommodations for COVID-19-vulnerable employees.

Illinois Great Rivers Conference Guidance:

- 1) Churches should follow Phase 2 Illinois Great Rivers Conference Guidance except as changed in this list.

- 2) Churches may begin meeting indoors in groups of 10 people or fewer for worship, leadership meetings, discipleship formation, and missional service. Some churches may determine that they will continue to meet for public worship exclusively online in order to avoid excluding congregants who may not yet feel safe attending in person gatherings. Most churches will want to continue to offer their online or broadcast worship experience in addition to any small group in person gatherings.
- 3) Churches may begin meeting outdoors. Where weather and facilities permit, it is much safer for worship and other activities to occur outdoors rather than indoors. At an outdoor gathering, people should sit with those from their household and maintain at least six feet apart from other people and household groups. Even when meeting outdoors, the church will need to follow appropriate social distancing, mask wearing, logging of participants, and other safety precautions. If continuing with singing and group recitation, increase social distance to at least 10 feet between groups and ensure face coverings are worn.
- 4) Churches will need to build a system to ensure that indoor groups will be 10 people or fewer. This can be done through a system of pre-registration (online or via phone reservation), tickets, or preparations to limit the number of people who can enter the building.
- 5) Gatherings are any distinct group of people who do not interact with anyone else. Multiple gatherings can occur simultaneously in the same facility if they had staggered start times so people weren't in the parking lot at the same time, had separate bathroom facilities, had separate entrances, had doors closed between the two groups, had separate HVAC air handling equipment that didn't circulate between the two areas, and had no people (including clergy) moving between the groups. If a person who was at any gathering tested positive for COVID-19, everyone in the facility would need to be notified and recommended that they be tested and self-quarantine for the recommended amount of time.
- 6) Churches should keep a log of participants to any size gathering or who enter the church building. This can be used to notify participants should someone also present at that gather later test positive for COVID-19. The log should include Name, Address, Phone, and Other Contact information.
- 7) All people, including worship leaders, musicians, pastors, and congregants should wear a face covering. Small children and others specifically exempted by public health guidelines may be present without masks. Masks are only effective if they are used correctly and used by everyone present.
- 8) Consider installing plexiglass to provide a physical barrier between the pastor and other worship leaders and the congregation.
- 9) All people, including worship leaders, musicians, pastors, and congregants should remain at least 6 feet from other people. People who live within the same household may be within 6 feet of each other.
- 10) Have a plan in place to provide adequate time and supplies for assigned people to clean and sanitized exposed surfaces (including pew backs, door handles, bathrooms, and other high traffic areas between services).

- 11) It is recommended that congregations postpone offering in-person communion until Phase 5. Holy Communion presents a unique safety challenge, as it typically involves close physical contact, eating, and drinking. Touching a face mask to remove or shift it to take the elements will contaminate the mask and increases the risk of viral exposure. Those serving communion share the same risk as those receiving, so any communion practice must be strictly non-contact. If a congregation still chooses to offer in person communion, they may find ways to invite congregants to bring their own elements or to pre-distribute sanitarily prepared and packaged communion elements that can be accessed while maintaining a 6-foot social distance.
- 12) We recommend that baptisms be postponed until Phase 5 but recognize that baptisms may not always be able to be postponed. Baptisms should limit close personal contact and no skin-to-skin contact is recommended during baptisms. If necessary, it is recommended that parents hold babies and small children as the pastor performs the rite.
- 13) When meeting indoors congregations, worship leaders, and choirs should not join in singing of hymns, praise songs, or other congregational music while the congregation is present.** Singing has a high risk of spreading water droplets which can carry the virus a significant distance and can potentially remain suspended in the air. A cloth mask is unlikely to be enough to protect you or your neighbor even as you practice appropriate physical distancing.
- 14) Use no-touch alternatives for passing the peace, collecting offering, and liturgical resources. Consider removing pew Bibles, hymnals and friendship pads especially if you will have multiple services. Use single-use bulletins or screens as alternatives. If you keep these resources in the pews provide for wipe down after each service.
- 15) For children's time, do not have children come forward. Instead, create from you-to-the-pew story moments engaging children from safe distancing.
- 16) Distancing: Have people spread out in the sanctuary space. Allow only one household unit per pew or seating area 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. Post signs to remind people that they should use face coverings and practice social distancing. Frequently remind people of these practices during every gathering.
- 17) Avoid greeting lines at the beginning or ending of the gathering. Help people to leave in a staggered fashion in order to avoid groups bunching up in hallways, doorways, or parking areas.
- 18) Do not offer fellowship meals, snacks, donuts, or coffee hour. Continue encouraging people to leave the building rather than mingling.
- 19) Children's Ministries – Although children may meet in groups of less than 10, they are unlikely to follow appropriate health safety and social distancing guidelines. Therefore, we recommend that you do not conduct in person children's ministry programs, nursery, vacation bible school, or Sunday School. Children are safest and make the congregation safest if they remain with their household groups while they are in the building. Remote learning, online, and at-home children's ministries are encouraged and may require significant innovation and investment in order to be effective.

- 20) Day Camps, After School Programs, and Youth Sports Programming – Day camps, after school programs, and youth sports programming may be held. They must comply with all of the detailed and specific requirements provided by the Illinois Department of Commerce and any additional requirements of local public health officials. IDC requirements can be found at: <https://www2.illinois.gov/dceo/Pages/RestoreILP3.aspx>.
- 21) Discipleship Formation – People may gather in groups of less than 10, wearing masks, and practicing appropriate social distancing. Some participants will not yet feel safe or comfortable being in public, and any small group experience should provide an easy and accessible means for them to participate either online or over the telephone. This may mean that it is more comfortable and effective for many discipleship-formation groups to continue to meet primarily online or over the telephone.
- 22) Missional Service – People may gather in groups of less than 10, wearing masks, and practicing appropriate social distancing. Mission trips outside of the local area should not be held. 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.
- 23) Leadership Meetings – People may gather in groups of less than 10, wearing masks, and practicing appropriate social distancing. Larger meetings such as Administrative Councils should remain online or over the telephone, and Charge Conferences should seek guidance from their District Superintendent on how to legally and safely conduct their business.
- 24) Church Staff – Church staff, pastors, and other workers using the church facility are allowed to return to work in the church building but working conditions must follow Department of Public Health approved safety guidance depending upon risk level. Remote, at-home, and virtual office work is strongly encouraged wherever possible. Continue to attend to cleaning and sanitizing the office. Pay particular attention to high-touch surfaces and cleaning hands after dealing with the offering.
- 25) Post signs throughout the building indicating symptoms and urging people to stay home and seek medical attention if they have symptoms.
- 26) Maintain a good stock of tissue, soap, hand sanitizer and disposable paper towels for drying hands.
- 27) Clean the building regularly and between user groups, paying extra attention to high-touch surfaces.
- 28) **People over 65 years old, those with compromised immunity, those with respiratory illness or injury, others who are at a higher risk of dying from COVID-19, those who have tested positive for COVID-19, and those who have been exposed to someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 in the last 14 days should continue to remain isolated and avoid gatherings of any size until they are given the all-clear. This includes church staff, volunteers, parishioners, visitors, renters, facility users, and guests. Church staff and clergy who are at high risk should have a conversation with their supervisor, Pastor-Parish Relations Committee, or District Superintendent to seek appropriate accommodation.**

PHASE 4: REVITALIZATION

General Guidance from Restore Illinois Plan:

- Social distancing policies still in place
- Gatherings of 50 people or fewer are allowed with this limit subject to change based on latest data and guidance
- Travel should follow state and federal public health approved guidance
- Schools, higher education, all summer programs, and child care open with Department of Public Health approved safety guidance
- All employees return to work with Department of Public Health approved safety guidance
- Employers are encouraged to provide accommodations for COVID-19-vulnerable employees

Illinois Great Rivers Conference Guidance:

- 1) Churches should follow Phase 3 Illinois Great Rivers Conference Guidance except as changed in this list.
- 2) Churches may begin meeting indoors in groups of 50 people or fewer for worship, leadership meetings, discipleship formation, and missional service. Some churches may determine that they will continue to meet for public worship exclusively online in order to avoid excluding congregants who may not yet feel safe attending in person gatherings. Most churches will want to continue to offer their online or broadcast worship experience in addition to any small group in person gatherings.
- 3) Churches may begin meeting for worship indoors in a place that allows for extensive social distancing. Attendance should be limited to 25% of the room capacity or 100 attendees, whichever is lower. Beginning July 12, 2020, churches with larger facilities may exceed the 100 attendees limit but not exceed 25% of room capacity if they have a local-church approved comprehensive safety plan that outlines their procedures for appropriate social distancing, cleaning, contact logging, and education of their congregation. This plan should be sent to their District Superintendent who will keep it on record. Insurance coverage adequate to the comprehensive safety plan is expected.
- 4) Churches will want to follow all of the worship recommendations listed in Phase 3.
- 5) Face coverings and masks should continue to be used if recommended by state public health officials.
- 6) Weddings and funerals may be held in the church building of no more than 50 people in any size room or 25% of the room capacity in larger rooms but must not exceed 100 people in those larger rooms unless the church has an approved safety plan as described above, in which case they may meet up to 25% of the room capacity without the 100 person limit.
- 7) Children's Ministries – Children's ministries may resume in person programming in groups of less than 50, including children and adult leaders. All programs should follow appropriate social distancing and use face coverings as recommended by state public health officials. All programs must follow Department of Health approved guidance on

adult supervision, cleaning, and group size. Some churches may determine that they cannot offer a safe and quality children’s program, and they may choose to continue their online or other programming.

- 8) Discipleship Formation – People may gather in groups of up to 50, wearing masks as recommended, and practicing appropriate social distancing. Some participants will not yet feel safe or comfortable being in public, and any small group experience should provide an easy and accessible means for them to participate either online or over the telephone. This may mean that it is more comfortable and effective for many discipleship-formation groups to continue to meet primarily online or over the telephone.
- 9) Missional Service – People may gather in groups of up to 50, wearing masks as recommended, and practicing appropriate social distancing. Mission trips outside of the local area can be held but must follow state and federal guidance on travel safety.
- 10) Leadership Meetings – People may gather in groups of up to 50, wearing masks as recommended, and practicing appropriate social distancing. Charge Conferences of over 50 people should seek guidance from their District Superintendent on how to legally and safely conduct their business.
- 11) Church Staff – Church staff, pastors, and other workers using the church facility are allowed to return to work in the church building but working conditions must follow Department of Public Health approved safety guidance depending upon risk level. Remote, at-home, and virtual office work is strongly encouraged wherever possible. Continue to attend to cleaning and sanitizing the office. Pay particular attention to high-touch surfaces and cleaning hands after dealing with the offering.
- 12) **People over 65 years old, those with compromised immunity, those with respiratory illness or injury, others who are at a higher risk of dying from COVID-19, those who have tested positive for COVID-19, and those who have been exposed to someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 in the last 14 days should continue to remain isolated and avoid gatherings of any size until they are given the all-clear. This includes church staff, volunteers, parishioners, visitors, renters, facility users, and guests. Church staff and clergy who are at high risk should have a conversation with their supervisor, Pastor-Parish Relations Committee, or District Superintendent to seek appropriate accommodation.**

PHASE 5: ILLINOIS RESTORED

General Guidance from Restore Illinois Plan:

- Either a vaccine is developed to prevent additional spread of COVID-19, a treatment option is readily available that ensures health care capacity is no longer a concern, or there are no new cases over a sustained period.
- All sectors of the economy reopen with businesses, schools, and recreation resuming normal operations with new safety guidance and procedures.
- Large gatherings of all sizes can resume.
- Conventions, festivals, and large events can take place.

Illinois Great Rivers Conference Guidance:

- 1) Churches may gather in unlimited sizes for worship, leadership meetings, discipleship formation, and missional service. We recommend a really big party. With music. And really loud singing. And cake. And casseroles.
- 2) Special health safety guidelines are lifted, and churches may resume normal operations in accordance with any new community health safety guidelines and procedures adopted by public health officials their area.
- 3) People over 65 years old, those with compromised immunity, and those with respiratory illness or injury are encouraged into full in person participation in church activities, as they feel safe and able to do so.
- 4) Some churches may determine that they will continue to meet for public worship online in order to avoid excluding congregants who may not yet feel safe attending in person gatherings. Most churches will want to continue to offer their online or broadcast worship experience as a way to continue to serve and encourage the new people who have joined their congregation through online or broadcast worship services.

Responding to a Confirmed Exposure

When a person with a confirmed COVID-19 case has been in the facility, regardless of community transmission rates or safety guidelines phasing, you will want to pay close attention to safety practices in order to mitigate the possibility of additional exposures. These must include:

- 1) Close coordination and communication with local public health officials.
- 2) Complete cleaning and sanitation of facility, particularly areas frequently contacted by users or areas visited by anyone with a confirmed case of COVID-19.
- 3) Discontinuance of facility usage until it can made safe for others to use.
- 4) High levels of communication with congregation.
- 5) Following the detailed instructions from the Centers for Disease Control found at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/guidance-community-faith-organizations.html>

Many of these practices were identified and developed from these helpful additional resources:

- **Illinois Department of Public Health: Guidance for Places of Worship and Providers of Religious Services:** <http://www.dph.illinois.gov/covid19/community-guidance/places-worship-guidance>
- **Restore Illinois: A Public Health Approach to Reopen Our State:** <https://coronavirus.illinois.gov/sfc/servlet.shepherd/document/download/069t000000BadS0AAJ?operationContext=S1>
- **Actions to Combat a Resurgence of COVID-19:** <https://www2.illinois.gov/sites/gov/Documents/Actions-to-Combat-a-Resurgence-of-COVID-19.pdf>
- **Centers for Disease Control: Interim Guidance for Administrators and Leaders of Community and Faith-Based Organizations to Plan, Prepare, and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19):** <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/guidance-community-faith-organizations.html>
- **RE-Launch: A Conversation on Embracing the Ministry Possibilities of 2020:** <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/re-launch-a-conversation-on-embracing-the-ministry-possibilities-of-2020>
- **Ken Braady, 24 Questions Your Church Should Answer Before People Return:** <https://kenbraddy.com/2020/04/28/48-questions-pdf/>
- **RETURNING TO CHURCH, Wisconsin Council of Churches:** <https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/>
- **Iowa Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church Crisis Response Re-Entry Plan:** <https://www.iaumc.org/newsdetail/iowa-annual-conference-of-the-united-methodist-church-crisis-response-re-entry-plan-13653399>