



**Western North Carolina Conference**  
The United Methodist Church

# **Guidelines for In-Person Worship & Ministry during COVID-19**

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Updated May 7, 2020

# Do No Harm. Do Good. Stay in Love with God.

As we phase into in-person worship & ministry, we call on John Wesley's "3 General Rules" to undergird our direction.

### **Greetings, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ:**

As faithful disciples of Jesus Christ in the midst of our response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we remain committed to our biblical mandate to "love our neighbors as ourselves" and our Wesleyan call to "Do no harm. Do all the good we can. Follow the ordinances (stay in love) with God." In doing so, we seek ways to engage faithfully in worship, study, and ministry while ensuring the health and safety of our members and communities as our first priority.

On May 5, 2020 North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper released [Executive Order 138](#) (see [FAQ here](#)) which provides guidelines for Phase One of the state's reopening. **According to Executive Order 138, the stay-at-home order is still in effect.** "People should still stay at home, but [Phase One] increases the number of reasons people are allowed to leave. All North Carolina residents should continue to stay at home except for the purposes outlined in this Order."

We celebrate the many ways you, as churches across Western NC, have been creative and innovative during this crisis in how you worship, reach, teach and serve in your communities. As Bill Wilson, writing for the Center for Healthy Churches states in a recent article, "We will not be able to un-learn what we have learned about being the church going forward. Our new normal will see us regarding our physical location as one of many expressions of our church. In doing so, we will quite possibly become more of the gathered and scattered church Jesus had in mind for his followers." Our mission has not changed (Matthew 28:16-20). We are called to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This is still happening as we continue to find new ways to worship, connect, grow, serve, and give in the age of COVID-19.

In alignment and compliance with governmental mandates and our scriptural and Wesleyan call to "love others" and "do no harm," the following guidelines are to be followed by churches in the Western North Carolina Conference. **These will be effective Saturday May 9, 2020 and will remain in effect until at least May 31, 2020.**



# Phase One

**May 9 - at least May 31**

Presently, UMC churches in Western North Carolina are not holding in-person worship. Churches are providing worship opportunities via an assortment of platforms including online worship, conference calls, DVD worship, etc. Pastors, staff and key volunteers are creating these worship experiences while maintaining current guidelines of physical distancing and meeting in groups of less than ten people.

Discontinuing in-person worship has helped us love our neighbor well by keeping everyone safe.

**These guidelines will be reviewed regularly and revised based on updated information. As we move through different phases, new guidelines will be communicated.**

# Current State: Phase One

May 9 - at least May 31

<b>Worship</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• No in-person worship on campus through at least May 31. Continue hosting online worship services while following CDC guidelines and observing physical distancing rules.</li></ul>
<b>Preschools, Children &amp; Youth</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Generally most of our preschools, childcare, children and youth ministries follow the public school guidance which is closed through the end of the school year. The <a href="#">CDC has strict guidelines</a> for limited reopening of preschools and childcare to assist with children of essential workers. It is difficult for children and youth to practice social distancing. If you plan to reopen any preschools, childcare, or children/youth activities prior to public schools reopening, we ask you to be in touch with your District Superintendent.</li><li>• Consider creative online children VBS and youth activity options to keep children and youth engaged, making sure to honor the On-Line Safety section of the <a href="#">Safe Sanctuaries Policy</a>.</li></ul>
<b>Mission &amp; Outreach</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• No mission trips including youth trips are recommended through the summer.</li><li>• All outreach to vulnerable populations (food distribution ministries, homeless, etc.) should be done with appropriate physical distance and sanitation practices, including no sit-down meals until public gatherings are safe.</li></ul>
<b>Church Staff</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Working remotely is still recommended.</li><li>• If necessary, on a limited basis, only essential staff and facility personnel should work onsite using the guidelines for size of gatherings, social distancing, wearing masks, gloves, etc. Their presence onsite should be done with minimal overlap.</li></ul>
<b>Discipleship Formation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Groups should meet online as much as possible.</li><li>• Any groups meeting in person should be 10 or less and must follow all CDC Guidelines for physical distancing. No food should be served or shared during these gatherings.</li></ul>
<b>Leadership Teams &amp; Committees</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Online meetings of all groups still recommended.</li><li>• Groups of 10 or less may meet in person if following CDC guidelines for physical distancing, wearing masks, etc.</li></ul>

**Recommendations around each of these areas will be regularly updated and revised. If you have additional questions about a specific area of ministry, please consult your District Superintendent.**

# Phase One: What other forms of worship gathering may be acceptable?

## At least through May 31

The following are other forms of worship gathering that may be considered. However, the required safety precautions in the checklist for each worship alternative listed below must be met. **These guidelines will be reviewed and revised regularly based on updated information.**

Worship Options	
<b>Drive-In Church</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Use FM transmitter or PA system with cars spaced 6-ft apart.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ensure that members remain in their vehicles and are only with people from their own household.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Restrooms should remain closed at all times.</li> </ul>
<b>Outdoor Worship</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Maintain physical distancing, masks should be worn by participants.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Keep restrooms closed.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> No congregational singing or bulletins.</li> </ul>
<b>House Churches</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> When groups of a certain number can meet, encourage worshipers to gather in homes in groups of 10 or less to worship together with your online worship service.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Encourage those who live near one another to gather close by, use neighborhood club houses, etc.</li> </ul> <p><b>Note: These house gatherings should adhere to the Safe Sanctuaries Policy and follow CDC guidelines for physical distancing. No food should be served or shared.</b></p>
<b>Funeral Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Maximum 50 persons allowed ONLY IF physical distancing can be ensured or unless sitting with persons from their own household.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Masks should be worn by participants.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> No reception or greeting line, bulletins, or congregational singing.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Online streaming of service for others to participate virtually is encouraged.</li> </ul>
<b>Weddings</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Gathering should be of 10 or less people including the couple and the clergy.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> No reception or greeting of guests.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> No bulletins.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> No congregational singing.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Online streaming of service for others to participate virtually is encouraged.</li> </ul>

A black and white photograph of a person's hands holding an open Bible. The person is wearing a dark, long-sleeved garment. The background is blurred, showing other people in a church setting. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the Bible's pages and the person's hands.

# Preparing for Phase Two and Three

**Remember: One size does not fit all!**

Returning to in-person worship will require a phased-in approach and may be different for each congregation based on their size, location, and congregational needs. To promote the safest practices, it is recommended that CDC guidelines, local guidelines (including state, county and local) and denominational guidelines all be considered when making decisions about when to enter new phases. **REMEMBER, being “allowed” to do something does not mean it is the best thing or the right thing at the right time for a local church, a family, or an individual.**

## **Phase Goals:**

- **Create confidence** for the church staff and leadership as plans are made for when and how to return to the church campus
- **Identify challenges** that would hinder bringing people back to campus safely.
- **Get comfortable** with the "new normal."
- **Continue to foster creativity and innovation for new ways to connect safely and effectively for years to come!**

# Preparing for Phases Two and Three: Staff, Volunteers and Space

When state and local guidelines determine it is safe for church employees to return to the church facilities as part of their normal work schedule, local church leaders must be prepared to establish, documents and most importantly rigorously follow clear guidelines. **These guidelines will be regularly reviewed and revised based on updated information.**

## CHECKLIST: Preparing Staff & Volunteers

- Ensure facility has adequate amounts of masks and gloves for staff and volunteers (particularly greeters & cleaners).
- Plan an online session to review hygiene, cleaning/disinfecting practices that will be expected upon return.
- Develop plans for changing worship logistics to ensure safety of attendees (e.g. offering, communion). *More ideas in the next section.*
- Develop protocol for ushers & greeters that would allow for social distancing. You may consider new roles for volunteers in high-risk categories. *More ideas in the next section.*
- Create a trial phase to document and practice communications, processes & procedures that will ensure safety when in-person worship is initiated, learning what is and is not effective.
- Publish your local guidelines for anyone on church property. Monitor understanding and adherence to guidelines among staff. Identify any needed guideline or process remediation.
- At the time you consider reopening a preschool, contact your District Superintendent regarding compliance with all guidelines.
- Establish a comprehensive tracking and notification system to record attendees to each service (including name, address, and contact information) in the event an infection outbreak occurs. Identify person(s) responsible for maintaining the tracking and notification system.

# Preparing for Phases Two and Three: Staff, Volunteers and Space

## **CHECKLIST:** Preparing Your Space

- Ensure 3-month supply of cleaning/sanitizing products. Have a system in place to reorder items before they are depleted.
- Eliminate places to congregate (e.g. store chairs; eliminate coffee stations.)
- Thoroughly sanitize all surfaces, especially those in high-traffic areas.
- Develop congregational seating plan for physical distancing. Ensure at least a 6-ft distance.
- Develop protocol for sanitizing to take place before and after service and in real-time during worship.
- Walk through each step of in-person worship multiple times. Follow signage, communications & directions that will be provided to worshipers. Refine as needed.

**[Click here to view the CDC's Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfecting for more information on how to properly sanitize your facility.](#)**





# Looking Ahead

Worship is an essential service for our members. The safety of our communities should not be compromised. Guidelines provided by state and local governments are a baseline, and recommendations for worship may be more restrictive in the interest of safety. Church officials must be aware of the local situation and should tailor their path through the phases of these guidelines to ensure that they are appropriate to the local situation.

## **When in doubt, emphasize safety over expedience.**

When first returning to in-person worship, continue to consider yourself an online congregation as not all members will choose to be on campus at first or at all. Consider a “soft opening” relaunch with limited-capacity, in-person meetings that do not exceed the maximum number of individuals recommended by state and local governments. Continue to engage online worshipers even after going to an in-person worship experience.

**The information in the following section is provided to encourage preparation for future phases of reopening. We are not there yet, and we may not be there by May 31st. Additionally, churches are each encouraged to assess when they are fully ready to reopen on campus which for many churches may be well after they are “allowed” to gather on campus. Future updates to the re-opening timeline will be provided when made available by the CDC and NC officials.**

# Looking Ahead: Initial Return to In-Person Worship

If in reviewing these guidelines, the church determines they cannot meet them for Sunday worship, it is recommended that the church shall continue worshiping only online and review other in-person ministries for the ability to meet the guidelines. **These guidelines will be reviewed regularly and revised based on updated information. As we move through launch phases, new guidelines will be communicated.**

## **CHECKLIST:** The Church is ready to return to a version of in-person worship when:

- Church & staff are in compliance with state/local orders regarding distancing, gathering & sanitation (including the ability to sanitize common areas before, during, and after worship).
- The church is properly staffed with the trained volunteers/lay people necessary to regulate and enforce state/local orders regarding distancing, gathering, sanitation (incl. seating, mask wearing, bathroom occupancy, opening/closing doors, parking).
- The church can provide reasonable accommodation to allow for comfortable worship while still complying with physical distancing requirements (for example: clearly marked areas, large spaces for families, special seating for high risk individuals, etc.)
- The church has a clear, proactive communication strategy to ensure congregants are aware of current practices and safety/wellness protocols (e.g. email, website, social media, signage at the church).
- The church has a dedicated team which reviews the church's compliance to state/local protocols.

## **Who Should Attend In-Person Worship Services?**

Congregants meeting the following criteria are recommended to attend in-person worship:

- People who are well (no recent contact with infected persons, not exhibiting flu-like symptoms)
- Well and physically uncompromised clergy, worship team (technical and performing), ushers/lay leaders
- People who cannot attend online
- People who feel it is the right time for their family

# Looking Ahead: Ideas for Safe In-Person Worship

The following are not to be seen as requirements, but rather ideas to help churches manage worship logistics in their phased relaunch of in-person worship. **NOTE: Consider continuing online only church until guidelines can be relaxed to where a comfortable, normal worship environment is achievable. These guidelines will be reviewed regularly and revised based on updated information. As we move through launch phases, new guidelines will be communicated.**

	Recommendations
<b>Attendance Register</b>	<p><b>Goal: Prevent sharing germs via physical items passed from person to person</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• No physical attendance pads passed</li><li>• Create online attendance register</li><li>• Have usher/greeter fill out attendance register as people enter through verbal conversation</li><li>• Have individual cards available as people enter for those who do not want to fill out online register</li></ul>
<b>A/V Equipment</b>	<p><b>Goal: Prevent germ sharing and germs that stay on surfaces for longer</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sanitize before and after each service</li><li>• Identify microphones to be used by single individuals, no shared microphones, music stands, etc.</li></ul>
<b>Ceremonies</b>	<p><b>Goal: Honor traditions while keeping everyone safe</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Consider how your church will address special events: baptisms, weddings, funerals, vacation bible school. What events should be cancelled and what other events can be postponed or “retooled” in a different format?</li><li>• Limit baptisms to one person per filling of the baptismal pool or one infant per bowl of water in the sanctuary.</li></ul>

# Looking Ahead: Ideas for Safe In-Person Worship

	Recommendations
<b>Communion</b>	<p><b>Goal: Prevent spread of germs through food, passed elements, etc.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Utilize individual pre-packaged elements handed out as people enter worship venue</li> <li>Utilize individual cups, wafers, etc., passed out by individual who has sanitized hands, is wearing gloves</li> <li>Offer a blessing/prayer for those who do not choose to receive communion during this time</li> </ul>
<b>Entry &amp; Exit</b>	<p><b>Goal: Control pathways, prevent traffic jams, ensure everyone entering worship space has used precautions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hand sanitizer at entries and exits</li> <li>Single entry point, clearly marked exits</li> <li>Walk-through video to show path/process</li> </ul>
<b>Food &amp; Beverage</b>	<p><b>Goal: Prevent germ sharing and germs that stay on surfaces for longer</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discontinue all food and beverage on campus until further notice</li> <li>Pre-packaged foods given by staff or volunteer with sanitized hands and gloves on</li> </ul>
<b>Interpersonal Interaction</b>	<p><b>Goal: Prevent airborne droplets of potential germs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shorten services to allow for more time to enter/exit the premises Be aware of physical distancing</li> <li>Discontinue any hand holding, passing of the peace, hand shaking, etc. Instead encourage another way to greet each other at a distance (smile and wave, or make it fun – <a href="#">Click here for ideas</a>).</li> </ul>

# Looking Ahead: Ideas for Safe In-Person Worship

	Recommendations
<b>Offering</b>	<p><b>Goal: Prevent sharing germs via physical items passed from person to person</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discontinue use of offering plates, baskets, etc., passed in pews</li> <li>• Encourage online giving</li> <li>• Use centrally-located (at entries or exits, along designated single-direction pathway) collection units</li> <li>• Offer prayer that specifically mentions online offering to honor &amp; encourage online giving</li> </ul>
<b>Pew Paraphernalia</b>	<p><b>Goal: Prevent germ sharing and germs that stay on surfaces for longer</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remove all individual items in pews (Bibles, hymnals, pens/pencils, offering envelopes, attendance registers)</li> <li>• Use projection for liturgy, announcements and lyrics</li> <li>• Encourage bringing personal bibles/hymnals</li> <li>• Utilize single-use bulletins with song lyrics, etc., that are handed out by individuals who have sanitized/ wearing gloves and disposed of as people leave service</li> <li>• For smaller churches - Consider sanitizing hymnals and give one to each person/family</li> </ul>
<b>Reservation System</b>	<p><b>Goal: Ensure rules of social distancing can be followed</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not fill to occupancy through reservations alone; leave space for guests or unplanned attendees who may not have a reservation.</li> <li>• Reserved seats should be filled in a timely manner (e.g. 5 minutes after the service begins), otherwise they will be released to walk-ins.</li> <li>• Reservation systems must be reliable, easy to use, and accessible.</li> </ul>
<b>Seating</b>	<p><b>Goal: Prevent passing of germs and observe social distancing rules</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage social distancing measures from family to family</li> <li>• Sit every other pew or have a 6-foot space between each family unit</li> <li>• Consider dismissing from worship by family, row, or section of the congregation</li> <li>• Restrict seating closest to platform</li> </ul>

# Looking Ahead: Ideas for Safe In-Person Worship

	Recommendations
<b>Simultaneous Services</b>	<p><b>Goal: Ensure rules of social distancing can be followed</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Smaller groups on campus</li> <li>• Each group within a different area with service simulcast in multiple places (classrooms, fellowship hall, etc.)</li> </ul>
<b>Singing/Spoken Liturgy</b>	<p><b>Goal: Prevent airborne droplets of potential germs that linger in the air</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider who in your congregation should wear masks - congregation, leadership, etc.</li> <li>• Consider the distance between individuals/groups and the increased exposure created by singing and speaking.</li> <li>• Consider suspending choir practices as forceful breathing and exhaling can expel the virus further if someone is infected.</li> <li>• If the decision is made to limit congregational singing, use congregational Scripture reading and/or responsive readings to promote congregational participation.</li> <li>• Many experts recommend to limit all congregational singing.</li> </ul>
<b>Smaller Groups, More services</b>	<p><b>Goal: Ensure rules of social distancing can be followed</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shorten services</li> <li>• Divide congregation members and assign to services</li> <li>• Offer reservation system for services</li> </ul>
<b>Surfaces</b>	<p><b>Goal: Prevent germ sharing and germs that stay on surfaces for longer</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All surfaces people come into contact with - seating, doors, etc. - sanitized and wiped down between services. <a href="#">Click here for the CDC's guidance on cleaning and disinfecting your facility.</a></li> </ul>

# Looking Ahead: Ideas for Safe In-Person Worship

	Recommendations
<b>Vestments</b>	<p><b>Goal: Prevent germ sharing and germs that stay on surfaces for longer</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Discontinue use of shared vestments - choir robes, acolyte robes, etc.</li></ul>
<b>Volunteer Roles</b>	<p><b>Goal: Show volunteers they are valued while you are keeping them safe</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Allow for new roles to be created for ushers who may be in higher-risk category.</li><li>• Take time to re-vision what roles that previously were centralized around physical elements/interaction - can you give people a different purpose in their roles and not just leave them behind?</li><li>• There will be a need for a sanitation team to keep things clean.</li><li>• Consider temperature checks for all staff and volunteers.</li></ul>

*Special thanks to the Florida Conference for sharing their Guidelines. They serve as the framework through which we worked to develop our guidelines for Western North Carolina.*