

A COVID RESPONSE: Guidelines and Important Questions.

1. Pay attention to the Governor's Plan to Re-Open

Governor Inslee has put in place Safe Start Washington that is structured in four phases. Please refer to this plan. Keep in mind, even when your county might permit a more lenient stance, you have both the freedom and the responsibility to consider your context. To quote St. Paul:

Remember that "you are called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as opportunities for self-indulgence, but become servants to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Galatians 5:13-14)

Phase One: Online worship continues. The one exception Governor Inslee has made is for drive-in worship. Here are his guidelines: www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/Spiritual%20Drive-in%20Services%20Guidance%20Memo.pdf?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery.

Phase Two: Online worship continues. Five or less people may gather in-person. **Phase Three:** Online worship continues. Less than 50 people may gather in-person. **Phase Four:** Online worship continues. More than 50 people may gather in-person.

2. Create a Thoughtful Plan for How to Open Your Congregation

Use your leadership team or create a team to thoughtfully create a plan for how and when to open. It would be wise to keep in mind CDC recommendations and the phases from Washington State. A thoughtful plan should address the following questions (and undoubtedly more):

- How will opening accomplish your primary mission as a congregation?
- Do you have the capacity to clean the building thoroughly according to CDC guidelines between each use? <https://www.cdc.gov>
 - The virus also spreads through the air. How will this be addressed?
 - Give serious consideration to this: If you have more than one service, the pastor, worship leaders and janitor (or whoever is cleaning between services) will be exposed to all those who enter the building, even with sanitary measures in place. ***Your pastor and worship leaders do not have to agree to accept this risk.***
- How will you maintain physical distancing?
 - Will you mark off 6' distances in your building?
 - Will you have hand sanitizer throughout the building and in the worship space?
 - How will you ensure that there is no embracing or shaking hands or physical touch?
 - Will you rope off pews? – Keep in mind front, back, and both sides for 6-foot physical distancing.
- - Will you only allow a certain number of people to attend in-person worship?
 - Will quarantined family members only be allowed to sit next to one another?
 - How will you greet people at the door?
 - How will you hand out bulletins?

- o How will you sanitize hymnals, Bibles, etc. in the pews?
- o How will you collect offering? How will the counters count the offering?
- What will be your face mask policy?
 - o Are masks required for attending?
 - o Will you have extra face masks on hand to provide to those who come without them?
 - o Will speakers, singers, pastors, deacons, assisting ministers, etc. all be required to wear a mask when leading the service?
- Will you restrict singing as a further precaution?
 - o While singing is an integral part of worship, it has been made clear that the virus is transmitted through breathing by people who show no signs of being sick and singing can project the virus up to twenty feet. www.infectioncontroltoday.com/covid-19/churches-could-be-deadliest-places-covid-19-pandemic.
- If you have in-person Holy Communion, how will you administer the elements safely? How can you distribute Holy Communion to those who are masked? How is your safety and their safety being impacted in the distribution?
- How will you respond if people do not follow the practices you expect them to follow?
- How will you continue to minister and include those who are unable to participate in in-person worship? Consider continuing online worship experiences, Bible studies, etc. so those with underlying health conditions may continue to participate.
- How will you advertise what you are offering as a congregation? Signage, social media, your website (and other ways of communicating) should offer consistent information for those interested in online or in-person worship, what groups a person can join, financial support, prayer support, etc.
- What will you do if more people show up than are allowed?
- How will you keep track of who has entered your building? Keep track of each person in the building in case one of them contracts COVID-19. Have a plan to inform all those exposed to COVID-19 in your building.
- How are you working with renters or other outside groups who use the building? For instance, write to each of your building's user groups your expectations for the care of those who gather and for the facility. In the letter it should be stated that user groups are expected to abide by CDC, state, and local mandates as well as the requests of the local congregation. Breaching the conditions of the letter voids their use agreement with the congregation.
- How are you conducting weddings? Funerals? Other special services?
- Should there be potlucks or any food exchanged?
- How will the nursery, Sunday School, etc. be run?
- Will you be ready to close again if needed?
- Is your leadership team prepared to stand by the plan you have constructed? Can you take responsibility for your plan, change it as often as you need to, and refrain from speaking ill of the plans that other congregations put in place?
- Have you checked with your insurance carrier to see if any of your choices have negative implications for your congregation's liability?

I'm sure there are other questions and considerations not on this list

3. Meet Weekly to Evaluate Your Situation

Some questions to consider in your weekly meeting:

- How is this plan furthering God's mission of loving God and loving neighbor?
- Are there new facts to consider?
- What unexpected challenges and joys did you encounter?
- Do you see a problem that needs to be addressed before next week?
- How are you updating the congregation on changes to your safety practices depending on the changing situation?

Each congregation's rostered minister, along with the congregational leadership, should focus on the congregation's work and use of resources during this pandemic. This is a time to re-think what the congregation is called to do. The question has gone from "How do we do online what we used to do in person" to "What is God's Spirit calling us to in our ministry now? How shall we worship, learn, serve, grow, and explore?"

Finally, in all things, operate with an open heart and mind, carefully listening to one another and to the Holy Spirit. This is a time of adventure into the unknown and we walk with each other sharing support and ideas.