

West District News

May, 2020



Hello, West District Friends!

What a year, huh!?! I want to touch base with you on a few things.

First of all, thank you, churches and pastors, for your amazing creativity, flexibility and faithfulness in this time of social distancing and the cessation of in-person worship, meetings and gatherings. We have all learned a great deal about doing ministry with Zoom, Facebook and other platforms. I know all of us are longing for the time when we can gather again in person. Amen? Amen!

Our bishop, Robert Schnase, has issued some guidelines about resuming our public gatherings. You will find that article below. One thing I will highlight is this: **The bishop strongly encourages churches to continue their current distancing practices, meeting only remotely, until May 31.**

There is also information about Re-Launch webinars being presented by Rev. Karen Horan on Monday-Thursday of next week (May 4-7) that you will want to be part of. Space is limited, so register right away.

We will not be holding our District Conference on May 31, as originally planned. Our District Strategy Team is working on the 2021 budget, which will be a bit leaner. We will find a way to present it electronically to the district for comment and approval. When we are able to safely gather, we will have some kind of district picnic or celebration in order to reconnect and to see one another again.

Also, although there has not yet been an official announcement, don't count on having a Rio Texas Annual Conference meeting in June. Right now, we are considering holding a one-day annual conference in San Antonio, probably on a Saturday in early October (10/3 or 10/10).

"I thank God every time I remember you, constantly praying for you in every one of my prayers for all of you." (Philippians 1:3-4) Please take good care of yourselves and each other.

Blessings and Peace,

Andy

Guidelines for Resuming Worship

Dear Church Leaders:

On April 27, 2020, Texas Governor Greg Abbott released [“Texans Helping Texas: The Governor’s Report to Open Texas.”](#) This report replaces the statewide stay-at-home order that expires on April 30 and begins a phased re-opening of a variety of businesses and institutions across our communities.

As of May 1, there will be no official state restrictions on churches’ gatherings. At the same time, Governor Abbott writes in his report, “We are each called upon to be Texans: to act responsibly as we re-engage in the economy, to continue following all health precautions and sanitizing guidelines, and to care for our vulnerable neighbors. Lives depend on our actions.” The state chief medical officer adds that all Texans should “continue to practice social distancing, avoid crowds, and limit physical contact.”

Attorney General Ken Paxton has issued [“Guidance for Houses of Worship During the COVID-19 Crisis,”](#) which includes a set of minimum recommended health protocols for allowing employees, volunteers, and other attendees to enter the church building for worship and other functions. As the list of recommendations is lengthy, please follow the link to that state document.

Finally, Bishop Schnase has reminded us that our first rule as Wesleyan Christians is to “do no harm.” Working towards reopening should be done intentionally with careful consideration given to your local circumstances and ministry context. This is in part to protect those most vulnerable to the virus, many of whom are participants in our churches’ ministries. **The bishop strongly encourages churches to continue their current distancing practices, meeting only remotely, until May 31.**

As the bishop noted, churches are essential; gathering in one place is not. Being granted government permission to open is not the same as deliberate, prayerful discernment. So take your time, and know that your bishop will support decisions to postpone opening for the welfare of your people.

As we do look toward resuming in-person worship and activities, our actions must be planned in the light of what could be a long period of response to the effects of COVID-19. Following is a list of things to consider. It may cover things you don’t need and miss things you do need. The purpose is to prompt thinking about preparing for gathering again and to help churches remain flexible amid changing circumstances.

United Methodists in the Rio Texas Conference have done amazing work during this crisis. You’ve maintained connection and care as the purpose behind what we do and how we do it. You’ve proclaimed and lived a resurrection hope in a dark and uncertain time. Thank you for living out your discipleship in such powerful ways! Together we will take our next, faithful steps.

Grace and peace,

Laura Merrill

Assistant to the Bishop and Director of Clergy Excellence

(See pages 3 and 4 for the listed items referenced above.)

Considerations regarding church gatherings during COVID-19

Initial questions:

How will you be intentional and gradual about adding activities according to your congregation's ability to maintain COVID-19 related precautions? Will you follow the state's phased approach for businesses, which begins with limiting gatherings to 25% of capacity? What will you do if guests arrive after that capacity has been reached?

The governor's report notes that persons aged 65 and over, especially with certain medical conditions, are most at risk of contracting the virus. Who are the at-risk people in your community of participants, and what proportion of the total do they comprise? How does that impact your planning?

What plans will you have in place if you gather people for worship, and one of those present is diagnosed with COVID-19? How would you communicate with participants that they have been exposed to the virus, offer pastoral care, and work with health officials in response?

How will you communicate your next steps and state clearly that staying home is still an appropriate and faithful decision?

Will you develop phased plans for resuming gatherings? For 25, 50, or 100+ people?

Worship:

How will you continue virtual worship, given what you've learned about technology, internet capacity, and your congregation's pattern? Will you record in the sanctuary? Will you try to stream live?

Masks are highly recommended, especially in a context where there is singing. What will you do if someone arrives without a mask?

How will you mark worship seating to maintain proper distancing? (See the Attorney General's [Guidance](#), pp. 2-3.)

Would multiple services, or in-person attendance on alternating weeks (with others attending online) be a way to maintain distancing and keep attendance numbers within proper limits?

Could you leave doors and/or windows open to facilitate airflow and minimize surfaces touched?

If your church normally uses bulletins and doesn't have projection, how might you go without a written order of service for now? The worship leader can direct people, or bulletins can be sent out electronically.

Sacraments, special services, and music:

How will you adjust celebrating holy communion? Think about minimizing touch (elements, communion rail) and maintaining distance between people as they receive the elements.

How will you adjust celebrating baptism? Think about where people stand and how water is applied.

How will you celebrate weddings and funerals? Apply the same distancing and cleaning practices you will observe for regular worship. Is celebrating outdoors an option?

With all of these questions and considerations, how can you maintain a spirit of worship, instead of a focus on the adaptations? Practice the new way ahead of time if you can.

If you have a choir, how will you manage their rehearsals and offerings during worship? Singing in groups is clearly an easy way to transmit the virus with others. Is this a time to continue with other forms of special music?

How will you manage the disinfection of A/V equipment, especially microphones?

Passing the peace and fellowship time:

Is passing the peace essential to worship if it increases the risk to those who have gathered? Could it become a liturgical act between the leader and the congregation, without turning to neighbors?

If you do observe passing of the peace, what alternative means can you use (prayer hands folded in front of one's chest, touching the heart, bowing)?

Given the risk of contact at post-service fellowship time, how might you connect and follow up with attendees instead? Move greetings to the parking lot?

Consider refraining from offering food or beverages at church until a later date.

Greeters and offering:

Train greeters not to hug, shake hands, or hand out things, but to smile, speak words of welcome, and offer answers to any questions that attendees might have.

If any items need to be distributed, they should be placed individually on a table for worshippers to pick up.

Offering plates should not be passed but placed at the doors to the worship space; also find ways to continue to encourage online giving.

Small groups, education, and pastoral care:

Might quality small group time, rather than full worship, take care of the need for connection right now? Your time and resources are a finite resource; think about where best to use them.

What adult small groups will you continue online? How will you encourage people outside your church to join?

What will your strategies be for staying connected with children and families? (Find resources here: <https://riotexas.org/growingtogether>.)

Consider keeping childcare services closed, unless or until you are very sure you can maintain proper distancing and cleaning.

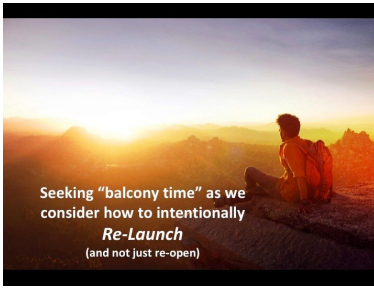
Facilities:

In accordance with the Attorney General's [Guidance](#) (p. 5), what is your plan for disinfecting spaces once they've been occupied? If you hold multiple services, this would need to happen before each one. Who could do this work, and how might you organize them? Do you have access to the proper cleaning supplies?

What plans will you put in place for other groups to resume use of your building? What policies will you require them to follow to provide for proper cleaning and social distancing?

Consider well large or intensive contact events, such as fellowship meals, Vacation Bible School, and mission trips. What are some alternative activities that could accomplish some of the same purpose?

Portions of this list are adapted from Ken Braddy, "[24 Questions Your Church Should Answer Before People Return](#)."



Zoom gatherings—limited to 30 people per session

This is primarily for Clergy but 1 key lay/staff person can be invited from each church

(More can be scheduled if needed!)

Led by Rev. Karen Horan, Director of Creating/ Vitalizing Congregations and Developing Leaders

Churches with average worship attendance of 120 or less

May 4, 10:00 a.m.-Noon [Register Here](#)

May 4, 1:00-3:00 p.m. [Register Here](#)

May 5, 9:00-11:00 a.m. (Spanish interpretation available) [Register Here](#)

Churches with average worship attendance of 120-300

May 5, 1:00-3:00 p.m. (Spanish interpretation available) [Register Here](#)

May 6, 9:00-11:00 a.m. [Register Here](#)

May 6, 1:00-3:00 p.m. [Register Here](#)

Churches with average worship attendance of 300+

May 7, 9:00-11:00 a.m. [Register Here](#)

May 7, 1:00-3:00 p.m. [Register Here](#)

(And please note...we may not need two hours, so don't get freaked out)

It is easy to get overwhelmed with SO MUCH information. Sure, a lot of it is great, but sometimes we read and listen to so many voices, we forget to stop and pray...pray and listen...and trust what you know about yourself, your leaders and your community of faith.

Yep, I have a list of resources you can check out (or choose not to!) ...and you probably have a lot you could give me to share. Let's do all of that, but sometimes we just need time to get on the balcony to get perspective. We won't have all the answers, and you won't have a strategic plan at the end of the two hours, but maybe we have some room to think, dream and breathe...we can always meet again!

Join me on one of the days listed above to get on the balcony—to think and pray about some of these questions and more:

What can we do now to be ready for re-launching?

Discern and evaluate – what does the church need to keep doing that has worked during this time? What new skills have you developed, and what fruit have you seen as a result? Have you learned new ways to connect with people inside the church? With those visiting virtually? What have you learned about on-line worship and new ways of giving? How are you staying creative?

Discern and evaluate – what have we been forced to stop during this crisis that maybe doesn't need to start again? Or another way to ask that is, what is essential going forward, and what is not? How will you decide? How might you listen to your leaders and participants in your ministries to answer this question?

What gifts have you received during this time that you don't want to lose? What have you learned that is so essential, you want to hold onto it? As a leader? As a church? As a community?

What is next and how can the church be intentional?

How can you be intentional about listening to staff and leaders, praying, and communicating what is next?

(Continued on page 6)

What is a goal or dream your church has had but not yet realized? Has your perspective on this changed?

What will be different, what will be the same as the building re-opens? How might staff roles/leadership roles change based on the focus of re-launching? What are resources of time, money, or people that could be put to use in a new way?

How can you as the leader be prepared for the possible push back that could come? How might you explain the “why” behind the “what”?

What can be new?

Could your church be a both/and community of faith, present with each other both in person and online?

How might you reach deeper into your zip code and reach far beyond it?

Could your church become a place for people to process their grief as a result of this crisis? What are some ways you could provide resources and space for listening, especially for people outside your church?

How might you re-imagine a summer connection with children and families, if Vacation Bible School isn't wise in your context? If you have mission trips planned for youth, could you make those smaller, local events that connect people in new ways with your own community?

Will you consider creating space to keep the creative “juices” going? With whom? When and how often?

What questions might you bring / need to consider?

Resources to check out:

Video/Webinars:

Re-Launch – Path 1 (free) [Re-Launch.mp4](#) (there is also a free study guide on the Path 1 website)

Fuller Seminary Formation classes (Free until July 1)

Especially Tod Bolsinger's “Leadership in a Changing World” <https://formation.fuller.edu/>.

Fresh Expression Webinars (free) – scroll down to Reset: Start your church again after the Quarantine <https://freshexpressionsus.org/distributedchurch>

ClergyEducation.com has a variety of pre-recorded sessions that cost \$15-\$20 each. <https://clergyeducation.com/recorded-courses/>

Articles/Blogs/Websites:

Leading Beyond the Blizzard

Carey Nieuwhof blogs (careynieuwhof.com)

We're all start-ups now (whether we like it or not)

4 ways to quickly (and unintentionally) stop your innovation curve and miss the future

Tom Bandy *Positive Trends, Social Realities and the Future of the Post-Covid 19 Church* (ministrymatters.com)

For any questions, please feel free to reach out to Nicole Alabi, Administrative Assistant for Project Development, Implementation, and Support, at (210) 408-4514 or nicolea@riotexas.org.



The Rio Texas Conference Disaster Response Ministry has been asked to partner with UMCOR to pilot an online Early Response Team (ERT) Basic class in response to the current world of "Social Distancing" due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The class will be presented via Zoom and will be taught by Angela Overstreet, UMCOR Consultant in charge of ERT along with trainers from the Rio Texas Conference.

Participants completing the class will receive credentials from UMCOR and will become part of the Rio Texas Conference Early Response network. ERT teams respond to natural disasters to assist families and communities as they deal with the devastation nature can bring. Most frequently, they assist with clean-up operations but are prepared to do many tasks as needed by the community.

The initial class will be split between two days and is scheduled for Friday May 22 from 5:00 - 9:00 pm, and Saturday May 23, from 9:00 am - 1:00 pm. Participants will be required to participate in both sessions in their entirety to receive the UMCOR credential.

This initial class is limited to the first 15 people who register and complete the prerequisites. For more information on the Early Response Team training and what ERTs do, go to <https://riotexasresponse.org/ert-basic>. To register for this webinar go to <https://riotexasresponse.org/ert-webinar-training-registration-form>

The Disaster Response Ministry hopes they can begin to offer in-person classes again in the near future but also hopes that this initial online class will lead to more distance-learning opportunities.



Hello all,

I am Ken Wadley, the Program Coordinator for the West District. I am looking forward to all of this lock down to be over with so that we can meet in person.

I have started, a random, spotlight of the churches in the district on our Facebook page. If there is something specific that you want me to mention either email or call me and let me know. My plan is to spotlight a different church every other day.

Also, the district is getting ready to set up online Lay Servant training, this is a first for us. It is still in the early planning stages but as soon as we have more information, we will send it in the newsletter and post it on the Facebook site.

Blessings,
Ken

Email: westkenw@suddenlinkmail.com

Phone: Office: 325/486-1500 or
Cell: 325/450-8051



Greetings,

WTCG encourages you to have a wellness visit soon, either with us or another mental health care provider. Over the last six weeks, life has rapidly changed. For the health of self and others, you have been faced with the challenge to connect and be connected to the congregation which you serve. For many, learning to live stream worship services, lead Bible studies, offer pastoral care, and conduct committee meetings via internet has been overwhelming. In these uncertain times, finding ways to “be church” is vital because your members “need church.” Indeed these are uncharted times and such times can take their toll on our emotional health which affects us physically, relationally, and spiritually.

WTCG is now offering Telehealth, which allows us to provide wellness visits online. HIPAA compliant technologies, e.g., Doxy.me, now offer this opportunity. Telehealth is easy to do and is more personal than you might think. You can use your smart phone, computer, laptop, and/or tablet. For the most part, the video and voice quality is clear. All that is needed is a strong internet connection, privacy, and a signed Telehealth intake form, which can also be [completed online](#).

In recent years, WTCG has successfully partnered with the Methodist Health Care Ministries (MHM); a partnership that allows us to provide quality mental health care to everyone in need. Moreover, our presence at the annual Rio Texas Conference Convention has enriched our relationship with the United Methodist Church. Part of our relationship has been offering wellness visits to clergy and spouses. As a participant in the Rio Texas Clergy Wellness Program, **MHM provides funding for clergy and spouses** to visit confidentially with a licensed professional counselor.

To schedule a wellness visit with WTCG, you can call the office at 325-944-2561 or send me an email, benh@wtcg.us.

We value the opportunity to serve those who have answered a call of servanthood.

Sincerely,

Ben G. Hubert, M.Div., M.S., LPC

Calendar

No calendar items at this time.

District Conference scheduled for May 31 will be postponed. We will keep you posted as soon as we know more details.

Thanks to Ken, the Facebook page is keeping folks updated and he will continue to add updates as soon as we are aware of them.

Other places to check are: The District webpage (see below), and the Conference webpage, www.riotexas.org.

A Note from Amy:

The conference office is making it possible for the Districts to have more up-to-date computer programs and they are adding us to the riotexas.org emails. Ken and I will, at this time, still have the Suddenlink email addresses listed in purple below, but we will also have new email addresses. I wanted to let you know so, with email problems occurring lately, you would recognize us. Thank you!

Amy: westdistrict@riotexas.org

Ken: westprograms@riotexas.org

**West District
Rio Texas Conference
United Methodist Church**

**1315 South Abe Street
San Angelo, TX 76903**

Phone: 325-486-1500

Fax: 325-482-0033

Emails:

Andy Smith, District Superintendent
asmith@riotexas.org

Colleen Haley, DS Ministry Assistant
revcgh@yahoo.com

Ken Wadley, Program Coordinator
westkenw@suddenlinkmail.com

Amy Moore, Operations Manager
westamy@suddenlinkmail.com



District Webpage: www.umcwayoutwest.org