

Great Plains United Methodist
Best Practices for Returning to our Houses of Worship
from your Congregational and Clergy Excellence Staff

The Time to Prepare Is Now

The journey ahead of us will not only be based on a proposed timeline, but also on our faithfulness as we discern the signs of what lies before us. A future we live into is not only dictated by the presence of COVID-19 in our churches and in our communities but also through the non-anxious leadership from pastors and lay leaders of churches in every corner of the Great Plains Conference. We as leaders will need to consider ways to avoid creating harm from moving too quickly, and the future consequences that may come from not taking the time to think through new practices.

We are a great network of strong communities of faith who impact our local contexts with the witness of Christ. We impact individuals, churches, communities, and governments with our United Methodist witness. As we begin to look ahead and consider federal, state and local loosening of the standards for gathering together, we want to provide some guidelines for how to begin face to face participation when that time is right in your context. We do not know when that will be, and each congregation will need to carefully examine their own context in the community where located following federal, state, and local benchmarks.



Guidelines for Gathering

Worship

- Continue holding online worship as you have been as many who are most vulnerable will not want to be in a community gathering. Recognize that your pastor may be one of those in the most vulnerable category.
- Record or live stream worship from the Sanctuary, maintaining appropriate distancing of 6 feet between worship leadership
- If the church decides to hold onsite worship, give permission to (and encourage) those who are most vulnerable to stay home for their health for at least four weeks. Remember

that your pastor may have health risks that make him/her more vulnerable if exposed to the virus as this decision about worship is made.

- If you decide to hold worship at the church, determine: 1) how many persons can be seated with a minimum of 6 feet between persons (side to side and front to back) and, 2) how many services will you need to have.
- Mark the place for people to sit on each pew with tape or other clear indicators.
- Restrict access to areas of the church other than the Sanctuary and closest bathrooms
- OR use your fellowship hall and mark on the floor where chairs are to be set.
- OR encourage people to gather in small groups in homes of members where they watch online worship together
- OR meet outdoors
- Encourage the most vulnerable (older members, those with compromised health, etc) to stay home and watch online. Encourage those most comfortable with online worship to stay home to allow space for visitors
- Remove all items (hymnals, prayer books, paper, and pencils) from the pews including pew pads, if possible. If needed, have bulletins placed in the pews beforehand (by someone who has washed their hands first)
- Congregational singing is discouraged as droplets/aerosols are spread even more widely. Soloists, song leaders, etc need to sing from the back of the chancel area putting the greatest distance between them and the congregation
- Encourage/require those attending worship to wear cloth masks. Have some handy to distribute as people enter the building
- Have someone at the door counting to know when you have reached the maximum number of attendees. Have a plan in place for the overflow
- If needed, schedule which worship service people will attend
- Suspend use of the nursery because of the difficulty of sanitizing all surfaces and items
- Have a follow-up plan on securing contact information for everyone who worships in person on the first Sunday back. Use this information to reach out and extend a welcome to each person.
- Celebrate the new births, weddings, significant anniversaries, graduations, and other celebrations that have happened since early March
- Recognize those families who have lost loved ones and are still grieving and lift them up in prayer

Sacraments

- Communion
 - Suspend the practice of Holy Communion until distancing restrictions are lifted
 - Or, if your congregation decides that communion cannot be set aside for now, servers need to wear gloves and masks; people stand 6 feet apart as they come forward; servers hand bread to the congregants; juice is served in small individual cups. Or the elements should be distributed by the properly gloved and masked ushers while congregants remain seated

- Baptism
 - Encourage families to wait for baptisms so that the family can all be present
 - If a family insists, then only the parents and siblings of the child can be present so as not to prevent regular worshipers from being able to be present
 - Live stream and/or record for the family who can't be there
 - Parents keep appropriate distance from the pastor and baptismal font

Between services and after the final service each week

- Have someone sanitize all surfaces that have been touched
 - Be sure that you have an adequate supply of disinfectant cleaners before you begin having onsite worship
 - Wipe or spray down pews with disinfectant
 - Please note: It is virtually impossible to sanitize pew cushions or padded chairs adequately, so cushions should be removed
 - Disinfect all doorknobs and any bathrooms that have been used
 - Disinfect microphones that have been held and receptacles used to receive an offering

Entering and exiting the church

- Have the door to the building propped open, or one person at the door who holds it open as people arrive
- People exit the building directly from the Sanctuary, allowing for 10 seconds between people. Family groups can exit together or ushers can be called upon to dismiss individual rows.
- If possible, have one door for entering and one for exiting
- Coffee hours and fellowship time are discouraged. If coffee is provided, it should not be self-serve and cups should have lids
- No hugs! Use waves to greet others.

Finances

- Instead of passing the offering plate, have the plate or baskets placed inside the Sanctuary where people walk past. If you have a woodworker, ask them to build a box with a slotted locking lid for a more secure offering receptacle
- Encourage online giving through Vanco, another e-donation service, or the conference office. Contact Assistant Treasurer Niki Buesing at nbuesing@greatplainsumc.org or 785-414-4202 if you want to set up online donations through the conference.
- Be sure that you are inviting and encouraging people to maintain their contributions to the church

Weddings, funerals, confirmations

- Keep gatherings to the appropriate number allowed whether 10 or 50. Live stream and/or record for others to watch
- Maintain appropriate distancing
- Sanitize following the event if the church is used

Questions for Church Leadership to Consider

- Has your insurance company weighed in on benchmarks for re-opening, and for operating any in-house programs?
- Are you following the strictest recommendations of the CDC and state or county guidelines?
- As we move through state and local guidance and restrictions, how will you limit attendance at worship and other events?
- How will you guide small group gatherings that have been on-line? Do you encourage them to continue their on-line presence or encourage them to come back to the facility?
- How will you ensure sanitation and disinfection of communal spaces following worship, small groups, or meetings?
- How will you update your building usage agreements after COVID-19?
- If someone who has been in your building contracts COVID-19, how will you do a more intensive cleaning prior to its next use?

These guidelines are just that, guidelines that cover some of the best practices for keeping your pastor and your congregation members healthy and able to continue doing ministry. Remember that some clergy are as vulnerable to impact of this disease as are the vulnerable members of your congregation.

If you have questions about the guidelines for your specific community, please contact Rev. Hollie Tapley, Disaster Response Coordinator, at htapley@greatplainsumc.org

You can also contact Rev. Nathan Stanton (nstanton@greatplainsumc.org) and Rev. Nancy Lambert (nlambert@greatplainsumc.org) for questions about content.

If needed, additional guidelines for small groups and meetings can be provided.