



The Kentucky Council of Churches In Prayer and Discernment

“HEALTHY AT WORSHIP”

Discernment guidance for Christian worship in the Commonwealth of Kentucky

May 5, 2020

Meditations from Scripture:

“All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are beneficial...Let no one seek their own, but the well-being of our neighbor.

~1 Corinthians 10:23-24

“You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, with all of your mind and with all of your strength...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.”

~Mark 12:30-31

Meeting together, the Conference and Regional ministers, bishops, and their representatives gathered in prayer and discernment as the government considers the resumption of certain activities in the midst of this deadly pandemic. We have met with the Governor and his response team and offer these invitations to discernment as congregations consider careful, staged reopening of church activities. The well-being and safety of each and every person is implicit in the teaching of Jesus. We offer this guidance as each setting of the church attends to that sacred charge.

- 1) **Loving Our Neighbor and Care for the Common Good Comes First:** We recognize that each tradition has particular history, practices, and settings and the responsibility for guiding those under their care with greater specificity rests with the leadership of each body. No single solution will be appropriate to every setting. There are however guiding principles derived from our faith. We are united in affirming that “loving our neighbor as ourselves” is a strong commandment of the Jesus movement. Compassion towards others even at the cost to self is a mark of loving Christian discipleship. Because asymptomatic congregants can unknowingly communicate the Covid-19 virus, it is vital that Christians exhibit great care, erring on the side of caution in every proposed gathering in order to protect others and embody Jesus' teaching.
- 2) **“HOW” first, then “When”:** As the state and federal authorities make legal allowance for resumption of activities, we affirm that the first question for spiritual leaders is not **when** shall we return for in-person worship, but **how** to do so safely and proclaim the love for neighbor by our actions. Therefore, each church, under the guidance of their particular leadership, is strongly encouraged to take adequate time to plan carefully how to keep any activity safe. This is for the good of participants, church employees, and the good of the wider community. Failure to plan is a plan to fail. Opening activities without thought for all of the suggested “healthy at worship” steps does not serve the Body of Christ. Careful planning and evaluation of each situation should be seen as a sacred obligation. Doing so will greatly reduce the suffering and death of many members, friends, and fellow Kentuckians.

- 3) **Distance Worship is Still Preferred. “Normal” worship is not possible at this time.** Because churches are permitted to open does not mean that normal worship can resume. The danger of infection is still great and church settings pose special problems for sanitizing, safe seating, traffic management, etc. It is still not safe for any at-risk parishioners to worship in any group of any size. Those who live with and care for “at-risk” persons should also refrain, lest the virus be carried back by the extension of contacts. If your congregation has the ability to offer worship via webcast, teleconferencing, or conference call, we encourage you to continue.
- 4) **Care for the At-Risk and Anxious:** We invite Christian communities in every setting to be especially attentive to the anxieties of those whose piety may be at odds with their safety and the safety of others. It is still unsafe for at-risk persons to be in worship or any other setting with other people. As leaders, we call on all church members to deal compassionately and carefully with those who may erroneously perceive that attending in-person worship at this time is a test of faith. We believe that it is not God’s will that we should endanger ourselves or our communities by our faith traditions, and that by adapting to serve in new ways we may honor both God and neighbor. There is potential for division among those who may attend services and those who feel left out because they feel they cannot. We pray that all churches my “strive to preserve the unity of the spirit within the bond of peace.” Attending to the needs of anyone uncomfortable with or unable to attend worship is an important shepherding task in this time as we discern which activities if any can and should be in-person.
- 5) **Phased In Meetings, Classes, Groups:** If after careful planning for safety, it may be possible for churches to consider in-person small groups. The church was born in small gatherings of the faithful, and there is grace and power whenever faith can be shared. Again, this may or may not be possible in all settings. Not every room or sanctuary can accommodate the social distance that will protect everyone. We encourage churches and leaders to use these opportunities for small gatherings as a means to discern and test your planning before attempting any in-person gatherings whether for classes, prayer or services such as weddings, funerals or baptisms. All of the considerations provided by your association, denomination, or regional leadership should be attended to, especially in matters of the sacraments. We encourage congregations to adopt all of the “Healthy at Work” and the proposed “Healthy at Worship” guidelines for every gathering, regardless of the size.
- 6) **“Healthy At Worship” Guidelines For All Meetings of Congregations:** The size of a proposed gathering is less important than being able to set, maintain, and enforce rigorous standards of social distancing, including but not limited to:
 - a) **Follow the Guidance of Your Tradition’s Leadership for Faith Practices:** Many regional bodies, denominations, and church leaders have thought carefully about how to worship and serve faithfully during this time. The practice of holy Communion, baptism, the laying on of hands, reconciliation and other rites, must be re-interpreted for this season of the church’s life. We do this in order to follow the commandment of Jesus that we “love one another.” Provided [below/in an addendum] are recommendations from member traditions regarding these sacred elements and how to practice them safely. We implore you take seriously the lives of others, and the suffering even a non-fatal case of Covid-19 brings. Jesus came that we might have life and have it abundantly. Let us seek the well-being of God’s people in all we do.
 - b) **Return to In-Person Gatherings Only With A Plan:** Before considering resumption of any gatherings pray and discern if this is possible and if this is wise in your setting. Consider those who are vulnerable and how to protect both them and the integrity of your particular community.

Consider engaging health care resource people, such as parish nurses, doctors, or public health officials in the congregation to help lead the planning. A coherent plan will include thinking for safe parking lots, safe entrances, safe exits, and how to get someone help who shows signs of disease. It is possible that not all gatherings can or should be resumed. Jesus told the disciples “no one builds a tower without first counting the cost.” Let us mobilize the full range of resources in our midst and let all err on the side of caution and care.

- c) **If Meeting Masks Should be Worn and Protective Measures Should Be Used by All:** In church settings, all persons should wear masks at all times, except when speaking at a long distance (pulpit), ensuring that no vapor or droplet travel is possible at that distance. Gloves should be worn by any who will be serving, cleaning, or ushering. They should properly changed between contact with others and disposed of in accordance with health guidelines. Other protective guidelines such as temperature checks, face shields, and sanitizing should be instituted per state and CDC guidelines with the knowledge that every added precaution will save lives and prevent suffering.
- d) **Sanitize Surfaces:** All surfaces including door handles, lightswitches, tabletops, chairs, etc should be disinfected before and after meetings. A plan to disinfect each restroom regularly is strongly encouraged.
- e) **Maintain 6’ Distance From Others:** It is still vital to maintain a minimum 6’ distance in all directions from other people at all times. This includes passing in hallways and at entrances and exits. Because of distance safety, it is likely that not more than 20-25% of usual occupancy of any space can be used. This means that if a sanctuary might previously have held 250 occupants, maintaining a 6’ distance in all directions will reduce this to about 50-60 persons. If multiple services are envisioned, a plan for sanitizing surfaces between will be needed. If attendance above your safe distancing occupancy is anticipated, a plan for scheduling who will be coming, how to help them enter and leave safely, and for compassionately, but rigorously, enforcing these guidelines should be implemented.
- f) **Strictly Limit Singing Because it Spreads Disease:** Difficult as this is, singing is known to cast virus-laden aerosols even further than 6’. Several cases of infection in Kentucky have been directly linked to choir and congregational singing in churches. Choirs cannot be recommended at this time. Cantors, pastors, and soloists, should be positioned well away from other musicians and participants. Congregational singing is not recommended.
- g) **Prohibit Sharing of Food:** This too, is a core practice of human fellowship, but is difficult to do in the former ways. Preparation of any food to be given to others should follow the strictest guidelines for commercial food service to ensure the safety of both volunteers, pastors, and parishioners. If food is to be present, the best practice is for participants to bring their own for their own consumption. Potlucks are not safe at this time. For the practice of communion each denomination may have specific recommendations. No practice of communion will be safe where multiple hands touch the elements, or the vessels that carry them. This may mean no passing of plates, no intinction, no common cup, no breaking from a common loaf.
- h) **Cease Child Care Until Further Notice:** Because it is nearly impossible to help young children socially distance, childcare imposes on them a greater risk from caregivers. Similarly, their play with each other ultimately exposes anyone they live with to any infection carried by anyone in any house of any child in the care room. Churches should attend closely to state guidance for commercial child-care settings, making plans to restart only when those facilities have been advised it is safe.
- i) **Be Faithfully Flexible and Gracefully Adaptive to Serve Others:** There is much we do not know about the course of this disease, and thus we must remain faithfully flexible and gracefully adaptive to changing conditions as our knowledge grows. It seems clear that there will be no

quick return to previous normal. Putting the safety and well-being of others first will mean setting aside some old traditions and the blessing and consecration of new ones. Treatment options, or increasing population resistance may allow for more relaxed guidance in the future resulting in more capacity to meet, but by the same token, increases of infections, outbreaks, or stresses on our health care workers and facilities may necessitate once again closing with little notice. This may be for a short period in the summer, or it may even be for a series of months through the winter while an effective vaccine is developed. We know and trust the God's grace and mercy is sufficient to guide us in every moment, and by that mercy we pledge to remain faithful, agile agents of life-giving grace.

As noted above, there are many specific recommendations provided in the addendum. A checklist of questions has been prepared to assist leaders in discerning if they are ready and able to open for in-person gatherings that are both safe and faithful to Jesus' concern for the well-being of all.

In the midst of these challenges, we are reminded by St. Paul that "in all these things we are more than conquerors," and that "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." As we make these necessary adaptations we know that the blessings and strength of God, Christ, and Holy Spirit will guide the church now as we have been guided for more than two millennia. The teaching of prophets and apostles and the life and ministry of Jesus himself, have prepared the church for "just such a time as this." Thus we offer our hearts to his service and to all people in God's name.



African Methodist Episcopal Church
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
Church Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Christian Methodist Episcopal Church
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of KY
Episcopal Church
Diocese of Kentucky
Diocese of Lexington
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Presbyterian Church U.S.A.
Mid-Kentucky Presbytery
Transylvania Presbytery
Western Kentucky Presbytery

Roman Catholic Church
Diocese of Covington
Diocese of Lexington
Archdiocese of Louisville
Diocese of Owensboro
United Church of Christ
Indiana-KY Conference
Ohio Conference
United Methodist Church
Kentucky Annual Conference
Memphis Conference
Union Church, Berea

Prayer
Action
Faith Unity
Justice
Peace
Compassion



Love God, Love Your Neighbor

#HealthyAtWorship

Considerations for Caring
Worship In the Time of
Pandemic

*by the Bishops, Conference
Ministers, and Appointed
Leaders who comprise*

The Kentucky Council of
Churches

Guide for Healthy Worship

-  Follow the Guidance of Your Faith Leaders
-  Make a Careful Plan
-  Use Masks and Other Protective Measures
-  Sanitize Surfaces Often
-  Maintain 6' Social Distance
-  Strictly Limit Singing!
-  Prohibit Food Sharing
-  Cease Childcare Until Further Notice
-  Be Faithfully Flexible & Gracefully Adaptive
-  Love Your Neighbor As Much As You Love Yourself

Addendum:

Resources For Discerning Whether to Reopen and How:

[Links to:]

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Healthy at Church Guidelines

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Letter from Bishop to the Indiana-Kentucky Synod

Kentucky Baptist Convention

<http://kentuckytoday.com/stories/getting-ready-to-re-enter-on-may-20.25689>

Presbyterian Church (USA)

Mid-Kentucky Checklist of Questions for Preparing to Reopen

Roman Catholic:

Forthcoming KY Bishops Recommendations

Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions reopening report

United Church of Christ

Guidance from the Executive Board and Conference Minister of the Indiana-Kentucky Conference

Wisconsin Council of Churches Preparation Checklist

A comprehensive document with valuable information for Kentucky houses of worship.