



May 12, 2020

## Guidelines for Returning to In-person Worship

Drafted by the Alabama-West Florida Conference COVID-19 Task Force in conjunction with the AWF cabinet

Our lives have been forever changed by COVID-19, and we recognize this as a time for us to continue to adapt and develop new ways of being the church. Now is the time for our witness to shine. We can witness to the love of Jesus Christ by following his example in acts of service and sacrificial love.

Therefore, our return to in-person worship is not, and should not, be based on our own comfort or desires alone. We, as the church, must use precautions in order to care for all people – those who come into our buildings and those who worship from home. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), those who are most vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 are those over the age of 65 and/or those with preexisting health conditions. People who fall into these categories are encouraged by the CDC to avoid crowds and stay at home whenever possible. For these and others, online worship continues to be a vital and necessary part of our ministry even as we reopen our buildings.

We recommend using extreme caution when deciding when to return to in-person worship. We also recommend that churches avoid using phrases like “we clean between services, so it is safe for you to attend.” While churches may effectively follow all of the necessary guidelines put out by health officials, following those guidelines only reduces the risk of infection, it does not mean that an environment is considered “safe.” We know that we cannot completely eliminate the risks in coming together for worship and acknowledge that on some level, there have always been risks.

**After clear evidence of a downward trajectory (trend) of new documented COVID-19 cases within a 14-day period in your county and you believe it is time to begin in-person worship, please:**

- Consult your state and local health officials;
- Contact your insurance carrier to make sure that your church and church leaders have adequate liability coverage in the event that you find your church and church leaders sued for exposing someone to COVID-19;
- Work through the following minimum guidelines with a team at your church;
- Communicate your plan carefully in writing to your congregation.

## Minimum Guidelines for Reopening

1. Any person entering the building must be asymptomatic. Consider using a touchless thermometer to take temperatures at the door.
2. Masks must be worn by all clergy and staff so as to be the best possible example. Use your common sense to decide whether to wear your mask while preaching/leading worship.
3. It is strongly advised that all laity wear masks while in attendance.
4. Masks and hand sanitizer should be made available to every person who enters the building. See the resource page below for a link to bulk order Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).
5. Safe social distancing should be practiced in all seating. Only those from the same household should sit less than six feet apart.
6. All doors should be propped open to limit the number of times they are touched.
7. Bulletins should not be handed out. Use verbal announcements, projector systems, social media, websites, and other media for announcements and communication.
8. Because viruses can survive on paper and hard surfaces for hours, consider removing all hymnals, Bibles, and papers from the pews in the settings where multiple services will occur in the same space on the same day.
9. Offering plates should not be passed from person to person. Create a place for members to drop their offering into a container that will allow them to follow safety standards.
10. Greet one another without physically touching and avoid the tradition of passing the peace or having a greeting time as a part of worship.
11. Choirs, congregational singing, and responsive readings may increase potential spread of the virus. Consider solos, instrumental music, humming, or hand movements to replace these activities for a creative group worship experience.
12. Consider how to celebrate the sacraments, baptism and communion, and remain safe. Pre-packaged communion elements are a simple way to keep contact to a minimum. A shared cup and loaf are discouraged.
13. Consider shortening the duration of worship services to reduce exposure to a crowd.
14. Think through the movement of people in your building. Consider dismissing in a systematic way to ensure there is social distancing.
15. Consider reducing the number of people allowed in a restroom at one time and having a team to clean the sinks, toilets, and stall doors in the restrooms after each use.
16. Be sure to thoroughly disinfect repeatedly touched surfaces after every use, including but not limited to door handles, handrails, light switches, pews/seats, tables, countertops, and any other surface that is touched throughout the building.
17. Hand sanitizers and wipes should be readily available in all areas that are open for use: sanctuaries, restrooms, hallways, church office, etc.
18. There should be no food or drink being served or available for public consumption in the buildings at any time. This includes coffee/snack time, congregation-wide meals, and/or fellowship times as it is difficult to maintain safe distancing. Cover water fountains to prevent use.
19. Nursery, Sunday school for children and children's moments in worship should not be offered at this time. Consider following your local school system's guidelines and protocols as a guide for when to resume.
20. Small groups (even those with 10 or fewer) should only be held where all safe-distancing guidelines can be practiced. Room size and ratio are important to consider when reopening buildings.
21. You must have a plan in place for when a member of the congregation tests positive for COVID-19. Keep accurate attendance records for worship or any gathering. When someone tests positive within 14 days of attending an event in your building, all people who had been present will need to be notified and a more in-depth cleaning will be necessary.

## Helpful Resources

Alabama COVID-19 cases by county

<https://bamatracker.com>

Florida COVID-19 cases by county

<https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/96dd742462124fa0b38ddedb9b25e429>

What to do when a congregation member or employee tests positive

<https://www.adamsandrese.com/news-knowledge/my-employee-tested-positive-for-covid-19-now-what>

Disinfecting your building

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>

Alabama-West Florida Bulk PPE supply order form

<https://awf-reg.brtapp.com/COVIDSupplies>

Research on aerosol stability of COVID-19

<https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMc2004973?fbclid=IwAR2aGDg8VCiA8g4o5bYyR6TM4GQRIgQzb4e0G8KqGq2xylp-qMmWp6oaEzs>

Guidelines for places of worship

<https://alabamapublichealth.gov/covid19/assets/cov-sah-worship.pdf>

Federal guidelines for phases of reopening

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/>

CDC resources for vulnerable adults

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/index.html>

Congregational singing references

<https://www.drheathernelson.com/singingandcovid19>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFI3GsVzj6Q&feature=youtu.be>

Chambers County AL article about church outbreak

<https://www.al.com/news/2020/04/coronavirus-shrunk-his-alabama-congregation-to-10-then-six-got-sick.html>

Risks and how to avoid them

[https://www.erinbromage.com/post/the-risks-know-them-avoid-them?fbclid=IwAR3CSdUFs8E8GbdPTlkbqs2UIN1hADd73xr\\_EnJItSNU\\_n\\_YQH5feNOv999I](https://www.erinbromage.com/post/the-risks-know-them-avoid-them?fbclid=IwAR3CSdUFs8E8GbdPTlkbqs2UIN1hADd73xr_EnJItSNU_n_YQH5feNOv999I)