

Regathering Guidelines from New Castle Presbytery's
Committee on Coordination (COC)
February 2021

With new vaccines as well as new variants of the Covid-19 virus, churches are asking for guidance in making decisions about reopening buildings for in-person gatherings. **All along, our churches have continued to be church: online worship, creative connections and pastoral care, responsible decision-making, care for our greater communities, and robust missional work have continued, thanks be to God! We have urged churches to enhance their online outreach, and to use this strange time for listening carefully to God's call to us and discerning how we live into that call.** And still, we ache to return to in-person gatherings, longing for congregational singing, handshakes, and hugs. **While impatience and weariness are not good reasons for prematurely opening our buildings, scientific evidence for compassionate precautions can guide our decisions.** New Castle Presbytery straddles two states and includes eight counties, each of which has their own specific guidelines for safely dealing with the virus. The CDC also offers guidelines: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/faith-based.html>

Since March of 2020, we have posted Covid-19 resources on our website, and have sought to update them as information developed. Our most recent update is available in the form of documents from Lisa Allgood, the Presbytery Executive of Cincinnati Presbytery, who is also an immunocytochemist by profession. <https://www.ncpresbytery.org/covid-19-resources/>

Remember: 40% of the people infected with the virus show no symptoms, but they can pass it to those for whom symptoms can mean permanent disability or even death. Even if we do not see a direct correlation between gathering in person and damage to the greater community, we are responsible for protecting the vulnerable.

Both Delaware and Maryland are in "Phase 2" of their reopening plans. They allow for 50% of legal occupancy, but with safe social distancing both sideways and from front to back, most sanctuaries will not be able to accommodate 50% safely. Rigorous protections must be in place, and churches need to be prepared for several possibilities. Just because the state allows for something does not mean that it is advisable. *All things are lawful..., but not all things are beneficial...* (1 Corinthians 6:12)

- Session should **decide unanimously whether to open, with the pastor(s)' vote included.** Let scientific evidence rather than impatience be their guide.
- Session needs to be aware of the **recommendations of their insurance carriers.**
- Session needs to **designate someone besides the pastor to enforce the mask and social distancing orders.**
- Session needs to **designate people responsible for cleaning and disinfecting spaces before and after gatherings, provide hand sanitizer, and perhaps even masks** in case anyone has forgotten theirs.
- Session needs to **have a plan for notifying congregants and health officials** if anyone who has been on site has tested positive for the virus.

We continue to recommend the following:

- **Churches are urged to livestream or otherwise make worship accessible online, and to refrain from gathering in person.** If any are gathering anyway, for the purpose of recording or worshipping in small numbers, using the CDC and local guidelines as their guidance, the following are critical:
- Of course, **masks**, **6' minimum social distancing**, and **hand-washing** should be **required** for any event where people are gathering, even outdoors.
- The virus can be passed on physical surfaces, so bulletins, hymnals, offering plates, and communion issues need to be addressed by creative work-arounds: **projection, drop-off receptacles, and single-serve communion kits** are ways that very small groups can gather.
- **Singing is strongly discouraged** - singing one hymn, even through a mask, is equal to nearly four minutes of sustained coughing in terms of potential for virus shedding. Recently, the United States Supreme Court upheld the State of California's ban on singing and chanting in in-person gatherings. Still, music, especially that which is not produced by a wind instrument, is important and can be experienced by listening meditatively.
- **Preachers, soloists, and liturgists need to distance themselves from others** by at least 13', preferably with a plexiglass barrier or similar shield between themselves and others.
- Heat or cool the room before people arrive, and then **turn off the HVAC** so that air does not recirculate. **Open windows** whenever safely possible.
- **Keep worship short:** time of exposure to the virus makes a difference. No one will complain.

When **Phase 3** opens, we continue to **strongly recommend masks, social distancing, hand sanitizer, alternatives to touching shared surfaces, and no handshakes or hugging.**

One more word: This time of pandemic has been **stressful on us all.** We are all operating from the same CDC guidelines to deal with a quirky and many-faceted virus: super-contagious, sometimes mild, but capable of vicious long-term effects and even death - it is ten times more fatal than the flu. And **we are the Body of Christ: held to higher standards of compassion and accountability.** Our **pastors are worn out** trying to figure out how to lead worship safely, to contend with enormous frustrations in trying to do pastoral care, teach, and preach in new media. **Be kind. Embrace grace. Forgive mistakes. Carry one another's burdens. Take care of the most vulnerable.** This virus will still likely be with us for a long time, but progress is being made, and **we will come out of it refined by the fire of its challenge. Trust in God to bring a freshly-formed Church out of this.** *And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*