



# Community of Christ

CHRIST'S MISSION, OUR MISSION

## **Preparing to Reopen In-person Congregation Gatherings**

Duration: In effect until further notice

Updated 3/11/2021

During the COVID-19 outbreak of 2020, the Presidency advised the church at all levels to comply with stay-at-home orders issued by governments and professional health organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). As governments began to reopen economies and social life, the Presidency provided this resource to assist congregations in preparing to resume in-person gatherings when appropriate.

These updated guidelines reflect current knowledge and recommendations of scientists and health organizations. We anticipate the continued positive impact of vaccines partnered with the consistent use of masks and social distancing. These updated guidelines will assist local leaders in making responsible choices in how congregation members may gather in-person for worship.

Community of Christ is a global community. This means the basic guidelines below will need to be reviewed and modified, as needed, by local leaders and field apostles to address the specific criteria established by each government. While some guidelines will differ according to local government standards and available provisions, the guidelines used in every field must endeavor to uphold the principles outlined below. Field apostles may provide further direction on how and when guidelines will be implemented in different fields.

In all cases, congregation leaders need to work with their mission center president and supervising apostle to develop plans to reopen congregations for in-person gatherings.

## **Principles upheld during the COVID-19 pandemic and for reopening congregations**

1. The church's response should emphasize "protecting the most vulnerable" (Doctrine and Covenants 164:6a) in our congregations, cities, towns, and villages. This includes our senior members and those already affected by other health challenges.
2. The church's actions should emphasize preventative strategies to keep COVID-19 from spreading. Beyond managing risk, we are trying to be good world citizens, taking the lead on implementing solutions and not adding to the problem.
3. Primary prevention strategies are the use of masks and "social (physical) distancing." This requires wearing masks (over the age of 2) and maintaining a minimum separation of six (6) feet, or (2) metres and limiting the size of gatherings as prescribed by the local government.
4. The church, as a part of society, should comply with local government guidelines to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.
5. Congregational leaders need to consult with their mission center president and field apostle in making decisions for reopening congregations.
6. Church leaders should proceed cautiously and make responsible choices that emphasize the well-being of individuals, the congregation, and their communities in which members and friends live. Patience and restraint now may reduce suffering and death for some later.
7. People should not be pressured to attend in-person church gatherings during the pandemic, and church attendance at in-person gatherings never should be presented as a "test of faith" or measure of commitment. Concerned people should be encouraged to do what is best, given their personal situation and risk factors.
8. Congregations should consider the best combination of in-person and online ministries to move forward.
9. If a conflict exists between local requirements and guidance in this document, the most restrictive requirements should be followed.
10. The Mission Center President should consult with the supervising apostle if there are questions or requested exceptions to these guidelines.

### **Criteria for reopening congregations for in-person gatherings**

- A. Congregations must comply with local government guidelines that stipulate how and when religious organizations can meet in-person. The decision for a congregation to begin in-person gatherings must include consultation with the mission center president and field apostle to ensure the well-being of all congregants and the community. Note: This includes monitoring data that suggest when a congregation must be closed again for a changing risk to the members and community.
- B. A sustainable decline in COVID-19 cases has occurred for three (3) weeks or as recommended by the local government, and the new infection rate in the county or counties served by the congregation must be below 10 per 100,000 population on a seven-day moving average at <https://globalepidemics.org/key-metrics-for-covid-suppression/> (see counties).
- C. Testing for COVID-19 is available locally.
- D. Local hospitals are not overloaded with COVID-19 patients and can provide treatment for all patients and health conditions needing hospital care.
- E. Masks (over the age of 2) are required in order to participate in gatherings. Additional personal protective equipment (gloves, sanitizer) should be made available for use as needed during group gatherings.

### **Guidelines for returning to in-person congregation gatherings**

Providing a combination of in-person and online ministries will be important to reach people as we journey into the future. If the mission center president and supervising apostle have consulted and determined reopening can occur, if government guidelines allow for religious organizations to meet in-person, and if the criteria above have been met, the following provisions need to be considered, and in some cases implemented before in-person gatherings begin:

#### **Church facility**

- Prepare the church building or meeting location before every gathering by cleaning and sanitizing door handles, light switches, bathroom faucets, countertops, cameras used for online streaming, microphones, keyboards, musical instruments, and other commonly touched areas. Refer to national health organizations for recommended cleaning protocol.
  - If the building is empty for seven days or longer, the risk of surface transmission is greatly reduced, and the above cleaning and sanitizing steps are not required.

- Ventilation is key to reducing the risk of COVID and it is clear that superspreading tends to occur in low ventilation settings. The video available at this link shows some examples of the effect of different ventilation strategies on aerosol concentrations:  
<https://flipboard.com/video/wsj/339c28c9e1>
- Please keep in mind that no single solution is 100% effective in all situations. We usually need to implement multiple solutions to optimize the goal of bringing in **well mixed, clean** air into our meeting spaces.
- To better understand the risks of meeting indoors, especially in winter, see Section 8 on aerosol transmission and ventilation in the following document: <https://tinyurl.com/FAQ-aerosols>
- After exploring these resources, consider increasing ventilation and improving air quality. Additional details on how this can be accomplished can be found in Appendix A, “Ventilation in Buildings.” **Always consult your HVAC professional when making adjustments to your system.**
- If the building is used more often than once every seven days, establish a cleaning contract or volunteer cleaning plan to meet local sanitation guidelines between each use of the facility. Keep and maintain a calendar of dates and persons who cleaned the building.
  - If you use an outside cleaning company, consult with it about adding any cleaning protocols to comply with minimum requirements under governmental rules and regulations. This discussion should include the types of products it is using and its policies to limit exposure by or to its staff and employees.
- Do not provide refreshments and food in church settings.
- Post signs in the building that encourage noncontact greetings.
- Post signs at the front door:
  - Anyone who feels ill, has a fever over 37.8°C/100°F, persistent cough, sore throat, or runny nose is encouraged not to enter the facility and risk exposing others.
  - People who have tested positive for COVID-19, and any member of their family unit, should not enter the facility for at least 14 days after receiving their test results and showing no signs of illness. (Note: Family units are groups living in the same dwelling space.)

- The pastor should consider naming a *facility health officer* for the congregation to help assure all requirements are in place and being followed. The health officer will be responsible for immediately notifying the pastor or pastoral team if a problem arises, if someone needs to be asked to leave the gathering, or if the gathering needs to end. The pastor ultimately will be responsible for ensuring established protocols are understood and executed. Documentation of someone being asked to leave or an event being canceled due to a potential risk to others must be submitted to the pastor and mission center president within 24 hours. If possible, the name of the person(s), address, phone, and email must be secured. This information and a list of others in attendance must be submitted in case the health authorities need to be contacted.
- Assign a person each time the group gathers to create a list of attendees. Make sure contact information is available for people who do not attend regularly. The list must be maintained until further notice in case it needs to be accessed for future tracing purposes.
- All participants (over the age of 2) are required to wear masks. Extra masks should be at the entrance to the facility for those who arrive without their own masks. These extra masks should be disposable.
- Hand sanitizer (with 60 percent or more alcohol) should be available in multiple locations. In nations where hand sanitizer is not readily available, have multiple stations with reusable water buckets with faucet and soap. People should be encouraged to wash or sanitize their hands when entering the building.
- Remove pens, information cards, Bibles, hymnals, etc. from seats to prevent the risk of spreading the virus and to reduce the number of items to sanitize if gatherings are held more frequently than once every seven days.
- Post a sign on the restroom door and limit the number of people allowed in this smaller area at one time. It is recommended that only one person should use the restroom at a time unless supervising a child or being from the same family unit.
- If you learn a person recently tested positive for COVID-19 and attended an activity at the church facility, then shut down all activities for at least seven days or until the facility has been thoroughly cleaned and sanitized by a professional company.

- Anyone who had close contact (within six feet for a total of fifteen minutes or more) with the person who tested positive should self-isolate for 14 days before returning to in person church gatherings.
- Initial COVID vaccine trials did not measure whether a person who is vaccinated is less likely to spread the virus to someone else. Until further research proves otherwise the assumption is vaccinated individuals may still carry and transmit the virus.

### **Physical distancing**

- Post signs that remind members to comply with local government guidelines for social/physical distancing—six (6) feet/two (2) metres.
- Develop a seating plan for groups that establishes appropriate physical distancing. (People who live in the same household can sit together.)
- The maximum number of participants for a gathering will be determined by government guidelines or the size of space to accommodate the physical-distancing requirement.
  - Congregations should try to limit attendance to 30 percent of the seating capacity. Adding additional service times or opening fellowship halls for seating with video screens are possible solutions.
- For larger congregations—more than 50—consider holding two services to ensure appropriate physical distancing. Develop a plan for cleaning surfaces between services.
- Provide online worship services for members who are more vulnerable to health risk or are not ready to return. Remember to be aware of and think through issues related to security and copyright when using online alternatives.

### **Church-school programs**

- Church-school programs or small-group activities should be postponed until governments have allowed children to return to schools. If activities are provided, consider holding them outside with physical distancing. Cleaning requirements must be met as stipulated by local government guidelines.
- Consider providing church-school programs or smalls groups through online connection. Remember to follow child-protection guidelines for any online events or meetings with youth, as well as general security and copyright considerations for online activities.

## **Worship services**

- Suspend the use of bulletins. Project announcements, order of service, etc. If bulletins must be used, allow for personal pickup of bulletins without a hand-off.
- Refrain from congregational singing when together in-person. Singing significantly increases the risk of virus spread. Consider alternatives on how to use music during worship:
  - Project hymns so people can reflect on the text as the hymns are played.
  - Use more music meditation in place of singing.
  - Use a recording of a member singing from home.
- To reduce possible contamination, do not use hymnals. If you instead project hymns/lyrics, remember to follow appropriate copyright guidelines.
- Do not pass offering plates. Arrange for an alternative location and receptacle where offerings can be received. The offering should be handled only by the financial officer or designee, who must use disposable gloves and mask in accounting for the funds. Encourage eTithing.
- Microphones should be sanitized following each worship gathering. Worship participants should refrain from handling the microphone. Minimize the use of portable microphones by more than one person, as they must be sanitized between use by different people.
- Consider shortening services to 45 minutes or less to reduce exposure and need for restrooms.
- Gatherings for weddings and funerals need to comply with the same requirements stated above. The congregation or guests must be prepared to provide or pay for additional cleaning and sanitizing following the use of outside groups.

## **Sacraments**

- Refrain from serving the Lord's Supper in its traditional form and using serving trays. There is an increased risk of participants accidentally touching the bread or a cup. Alternative forms for participating in this sacrament should be explored:
  - Have participants bring their own emblems to use.
  - Buy pre-packaged emblems.

- Have participants come to a designated location to receive the emblems to be handed to each participant in individual containers by a priesthood member wearing latex gloves and a mask.
- If emblems are prepared, the preparers must wear gloves and mask.
- Marriage ceremonies need to comply with the requirement stated above.

Updated sacrament guidelines released June 2020:

- The number of people gathering for the sacrament should comply with the local government guidelines *and* the church's guidelines. This applies to both indoor and outdoor gatherings.
- Baptism – a mask/face covering should be worn by the priesthood member performing a baptism. If possible, the candidate should also have a face covering until the baptism occurs.
- For laying on of hands – confirmation, baby blessing, etc. – a mask/face covering should be worn by the priesthood member(s) and the person receiving the sacrament, except for children under the age of 2 who should not wear masks. Priesthood members should consider wearing protective gloves where possible. If gloves are not used, it is important to use hand sanitizer prior to the laying on of hands and immediately following the sacrament. In locations where hand sanitizer is not available, the priesthood members need to be intentional about washing their hands prior to and after the sacrament.
- Refrain from hugging or shaking hands following the sacrament.

### **Midweek services**

- Consider suspending midweek services, youth gatherings, etc. to reduce in-person contact.
- Where possible, hold midweek services, youth gatherings, etc. online.

### **Church facilities used by outside groups**

- Any outside group using or renting our church facilities must comply with the same requirements stated in the above guidelines for in-person gatherings. The outside group leader must receive a copy of the guidelines and protocols, sign them, and return them to be kept by the pastor.
- The congregation will inform the mission center president and should be responsible to ensure that added protocols for hosting, physical distancing, and cleaning as defined by the local government or health organization before and after will need to be clearly defined, implemented, and documented.

- No food or drinks should be allowed in the congregation during the event.
- Any leases or use agreements with outside groups must be updated with the additional language related to COVID-19 provided by the Office of General Counsel.
- If you learn a person recently tested positive for COVID-19 and not long ago attended an activity at the church facility, then all activities there should be shut down at least seven days or until the facility has been cleaned and sanitized thoroughly by a professional company

### **Expectation for good-faith compliance**

- If a congregation allows the church building to be used in a way that is not consistent with these guidelines and a law suit is filed by someone who claimed they contracted the virus at the church, then the congregation will be responsible for all legal fees and any final settlement amounts approved by a court or through mediation that are not covered by the church's insurance carrier.

### **Supporting documents**

- Attached to these guidelines are the following document templates: Planning to Reopen, Cleaning Checklist, Participant Tracking, and Implementation Checklist. These templates are provided to help congregations plan, implement, and manage in-person gatherings.

### **Final comments**

In all cases, congregations need to monitor ongoing developments in their local government jurisdiction. It is expected that congregations will follow government guidelines and recommendations. Congregations also should monitor recommendations from their governmental health organizations for cleaning protocols and physical-distancing requirements.

Community of Christ Enduring Principles call us to uphold the Sacredness of Creation and to Make Responsible Choices. When we uphold our Enduring Principles, we participate in being good world citizens who demonstrate our care and concern for the welfare of all humans. We have no idea how long this pandemic will impact the global community. But we are committed to doing the best we can to care for our members and communities where Community of Christ is present.

To this end, may these guidelines assist local leaders in making responsible decisions that will care for the spiritual and physical needs of all people.

**For outside groups:** *Please keep one copy for reference and return one signed copy to the pastor.* The undersigned acknowledges the receipt of these guidelines and protocols and agrees to full compliance.

I acknowledge that I have read and do hereby accept the terms and conditions contained in this document.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix A

### Ventilation in Buildings

**Always consult your HVAC professional when making adjustments to your system.**

- When the climate and building design permits, open windows and/or exterior doors in opposite sides of the meeting room with a fan or fans blowing out of windows on one side of the room. This creates a push-pull ventilation process that readily allows fresh air to replace potentially contaminated air. Start this process 2 hours before gathering and maintain throughout the gathering event. (inexpensive option)
- In buildings with forced-air heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems, turn the fan system to “On” so that the air mixing in the space is optimized. Start this process 2 hours before gathering and maintain throughout the gathering event. If the fan system is set on “Auto” the system will turn on and off according to the temperature, resulting in stagnant, potentially contaminated air remaining in the building. (inexpensive option)
- In buildings with forced-air heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems, consider the installation of MERV 13 filters **in consultation with your HVAC professional**. MERV 13 filters will need to be changed more often than traditional filters. (moderately expensive option due to filter, increased energy costs, and potential HVAC professional consultation fee)
- In buildings with forced-air heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems with an economizer, consider setting the outside air to as high a percentage as possible for your climate, up to 100% outside air, in consultation with your HVAC professional. Without fresh, outside air and MERV 13 filters, the HVAC system will simply recirculate the virus. (expensive option due to energy costs and potential HVAC professional consultation fee)
- In buildings with radiant heat sources (radiators, in-floor systems, electric baseboards, etc.) consider using free-standing UV-C and HEPA filtration systems. (most expensive – multiple units will be needed for larger meeting spaces) Make sure these units do not produce ozone and are certified by UL 867.

- Note that used MERV 13 and HEPA filters require special handling. Filters should be changed by someone using personal protective equipment and the filters should be sealed in plastic bags prior to normal disposal according to <https://www.ashrae.org/technical-resources/filtration-disinfection>.
  - A properly fitted respirator (N95 or higher)
  - Eye protection (safety glasses, goggles, or face shield)
  - Disposable gloves
  - When maintenance tasks are completed, personnel should immediately dispose of the respirator and gloves, wash their hands with soap and water (or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer), and wipe down eye protection.