



NORTH ALABAMA CONFERENCE  
THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

**Do No Harm**  
*Recommendations  
for Reopening  
Our Church Buildings*

With Governor Ivey’s announcement of the “Safer at Home” rules, many people are anticipating the time when we can once again gather to worship together, when staff can return to their offices, and when small groups can begin meeting again. One of the pandemic’s gifts is reminding us of the sacred value of the gathered community and of embodied worship. However, the decision to resume these activities is complex.

For those of us in the Wesleyan tradition, we find ourselves living within the tension of the general rules of the Methodist Societies:

- 1 Do no harm.**
- 2 Do all the good you can.**
- 3 Attend upon the ordinances of God.**

Our desire to rush back into worship should not be harmful to others, especially our most vulnerable, and it should be done in such a way that we actually witness to our loving and faithful God.

We anticipate the following gradual phase in of activities:

<b>Current Situation</b>	Suspension of services as recommended by our Bishop and Cabinet, governmental, and medical authorities
<b>Phase One</b>	This phase begins when there have been two full weeks of declining cases, a consistent supply of tests are accessible, and the cleaning supplies needed to sanitize our worship and meeting spaces are readily available. At this point, gatherings of no more than 10 are recommended along with masks and social distancing.
<b>Phase Two</b>	This phase would begin when there has been an appropriate window of continuing decreases in new cases. This may differ from county to county and district to district. At this point, gatherings of no more than 25 are recommended along with masks and social distancing.
<b>Phase Three</b>	This phase would begin when there has been an appropriate window of continuing decreases in new cases. This may differ from county to county and district to district. At this point, gatherings of no more than 50 are recommended along with masks and social distancing.
<b>Phase Four</b>	This phase would begin when there has been an appropriate window of continuing decreases in new cases. This may differ from county to county and district to district. At this point, gatherings of no more than 100 are recommended along with masks and social distancing.
<b>Phase Five</b>	This phase would begin when there has been an appropriate window of continuing decreases in new cases. This may differ from county to county and district to district. At this point, gatherings of no more than 250 are recommended, with fewer restrictions as defined by our Bishop, governmental and medical authorities.
<b>Phase Six</b>	Our new normal with fewer restrictions as defined by our Bishop, Governmental, and medical authorities.

*At any point during these phases the possibility exists for conditions to not improve or infections to actually increase. If that happens, the Conference, District or congregation might have to move back to a previous phase.*

The recommendations are not intended to be a one-size-fits-all plan of action for all of our diverse congregations and communities. It is impossible for any local church to create a totally risk-free environment, and worshippers must understand and accept that chances for becoming infected with the coronavirus will continue to exist well after the phased-in reopening of churches gets underway. While these are general recommendations, you will also find many questions which each congregation will have to answer for themselves and their community. If you have any specific questions, feel free to call your District Superintendent. They will be glad to process ideas and concerns with you. Also, if you have any hesitancy about returning to your office or church building, trust your instincts and wait. Just because businesses are open, does not mean that the church (or your particular congregation) should do so. We hope that you will find these guidelines helpful as you plan for the weeks and months to come.

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# Be Informed

- **Know the risk factors for the virus.**
  - Learn more at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) List of Persons At Higher Risk [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-at-higher-risk.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-at-higher-risk.html)
- **Know the data for the State of Alabama and particularly for your county.**
  - Alabama COVID-19 Case Tracker [www.BamaTracker.com](http://www.BamaTracker.com). Look particularly at new cases per day and your county statistics. Watch for declining numbers of new cases over an extended period.
- **Know your congregation.**

Poll your congregation regarding their expectations, fears and concerns. Be in constant communication. Also know that there is no rush to return to the building. You can continue doing online services and/or drive-in church, if your congregation is still experiencing anxiety and fear.
- **Read through the sections of this document that apply to your congregation.**

Since each day we are learning more and more about this virus and how it spreads, we may update this document as the situation continues to evolve. As always please watch for emails from the Bishop and your District Superintendent.
- **At the end of this document we have provided a number of references.**

Please take the time to look through those that apply to your congregation.

  - We recommend that you read thoroughly the CDC Interim Guidance for Administrators and Leaders of Community- and Faith-Based Organizations to Plan, Prepare, and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/guidance-community-faith-organizations.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/guidance-community-faith-organizations.html)

# Prepare for Reopening

- **Continue to provide opportunities for your congregation to worship at home.**
- **Stock up on cleaning supplies and hand sanitizer.**  
*If you cannot find appropriate supplies, then seriously consider continuing to suspend services until such supplies can be acquired.*
- **Stock up on cloth masks.**  
Consider asking church members to sew masks for use by those who need them now and for the church upon reopening.
- **Deep clean your entire church.**  
Consider shampooing carpets and pew cushions; sanitizing pews, bathrooms, light switches, microphones, etc. using CDC approved disinfectants for the COVID-19 virus.
  - CDC instructions for cleaning and disinfecting your facility can be found at this link: [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html)
- **Walk through your building and identify all the areas where you touch things and make plans for regular sanitization of all those areas once the building reopens.**
- **Make plans for how to continue safe social distancing upon reopening.**
- **Remove Bibles, pens, offering envelopes, and any other items from backs of chairs/pews.**
  - Ask the congregation to bring paper, crayons, etc. with them from home for their younger children or hand out bags with paper and a couple of crayons that don't need to be returned after the service.
- **Prepare signs reminding people not to shake hands or share hugs and perhaps suggest an appropriate non-contact greeting.**
- **Consider placing barriers to certain spaces in your sanctuary, fellowship hall and classrooms to ensure social distancing (such as, tape, removing chairs, and cones).**
- **Plan for multi-generational worship so that families can worship together in the absence of a children's church or nursery.**
- **Make a plan for what you will do if cases rise and you have to suspend services or reduce the number of people allowed to gather. Communicate that plan to your congregation ahead of time.**
- **Make a plan for how you will respond if your congregation is exposed to the virus and communicate that plan to your congregation.**

# Communicate with Your Congregation and Potential Guests

- **Be in constant communication with your congregation.**
- **Encourage anyone who is sick or at risk to stay home and worship with you from there.**
- **Tell your congregation how you have prepared the church for their arrival**  
Use words such as clean, sanitized, and disinfected.
- **Tell people the precautions you want them to take before coming to church (such as masks, hand washing, hand sanitizing, and perhaps the use (or not) of bathrooms)**
- **Make sure you are communicating whether or not Sunday school, small groups, and other normal gatherings of the church will meet in person and the reasons behind your decisions.**
- **Once you begin gathering, *over-communicate* the precautions that you will take at your church to try to protect your members and guests.**

# Common Areas and Hospitality

- **How close together should people park?**  
Consider using every other or every third parking place.
- **Consider closing restrooms.**
  - If you decide to keep them open, how will you ensure social distancing in your restrooms?
    - If bathrooms are open, post signs reminding people to wash hands and practice social distancing.
    - Consider using only one-person restrooms, or using every other or every third stall and taping off or blocking the others.
    - Have a plan for sanitizing restrooms between guests and between services.
    - Consider assigning a hospitality team member to greet persons upon their arrival at the restrooms and clean after persons exit the restrooms.
- **Discontinue coffee stations, donuts, and all congregation-wide meals until it is safe to reintroduce these services.**
- **Consider temporarily disabling water fountains.**
- **Place hand sanitizer throughout the church especially near entryways.**
- **When possible, prop doors open as people arrive and leave.**
- **Consider identifying some doors as entrances and others as exits.**
- **Place signs on entrances and exits, and limit the doors to be used.**
- **Encourage people to bring masks from home. Provide masks for those who do not bring their own.**
- **Ensure that greeters and ushers practice enhanced hygiene and social distancing and that they remind worshipers to do so as well.**
- **Develop and communicate plan for emergency exit in the event of an emergency when practicing social distancing.**

# Worship Services

- **Continue offering as many online opportunities for worship as possible.**  
Be aware that it may be a long time before many people are comfortable attending an in-person worship service and some may choose online worship as their preferred worship service.
- **Ensure the space is thoroughly cleaned and sanitized prior to every service.**
- **Adjust your worship space to create distancing among people.**  
For example, block every other pew, distance chairs, and encourage only those from the same household to sit together in family units.
- **Ask everyone to wear a mask.**  
Encourage them to bring their own but provide masks for those needing one.
  - Clergy and staff should model the wearing of masks and safe social distancing for the congregation.
- **Avoid handing out any materials.**
  - If possible, project all announcements or disseminate them electronically prior to the service.
  - Consider using an online attendance registration system.
- **Consider offering multiple services on different days and at different times to ensure the largest possible number of people can worship safely.**
  - Consider having people sign up for which service they want to attend (RSVP) and cap attendance based on your capacity given proper social distancing. Don't forget to allow space for guests.
  - Schedule enough time between services to allow for proper sanitizing of the space.
- **Avoid passing a plate or basket for the offering.**
  - Have stations in the church where people can leave offerings.
  - Consider online giving platforms and encourage people to give electronically.
- **Remove hymnals, bulletins, and attendance pads**
  - Project announcements, words to hymns/songs, creeds, and other liturgy.
  - Consider not using a bulletin if at all possible
    - If using a bulletin, place copies on seats prior to the service, and ask each worshipper to take and discard all bulletins as they leave the worship space.
    - Consider emailing worship information prior to service allowing them to print their own copy or follow along on their personal phone or tablet.
- **Assign microphones to those leading worship.**  
Sanitize microphones between services.
- **Eliminate the greeting time.**
  - Or offer a creative, fun, non-contact method of greeting which maintains social distancing.
- **Consider your congregation's unique traditions that would violate social distancing, such as circling up and holding hands for prayer or passing a birthday card around to be signed. Communicate with your congregation about how those traditions will be changed during this time.**



- **Consider dismissing in an orderly way to ensure social distancing (e.g., as families are dismissed from a wedding or funeral in a recessional, etc.)**
  - Clergy and other worship leaders should leave the worship space in such a manner as to discourage hugs and handshakes after the service.
- **Consider your theology and safety issues and consider what adjustments should be made to communion, baptisms, congregational singing, and other means of grace.**
- **Consider suspending the practice of Holy Communion until distancing restrictions are lifted.**
  - If you celebrate communion, consider how to ensure the elements are safely prepared and distributed while also maintaining proper social distancing.
- **Remind the congregation to keep their masks on at all time, especially while singing hymns.**
- **Consider making sanitizers available near each pew and ask those who vacate a pew following the service to wipe it down as they exit.**
- **During this crisis, it is essential that you collect contact information from in person guests so that you can contact them not only about your ministries but also should they inadvertently be exposed to the virus by someone within the congregation.**

## **Drive-In Services**

- **Coordinate with your local law enforcement or emergency management agency.**
- **Utilize volunteers or signage to direct parking.**
- **Everyone, including volunteers, staff, and clergy, must follow social distancing guidelines at all times.**
- **All worshipers in each vehicle must share the same household.**
- **No one should leave vehicles for any reason.**
- **Provide no bathroom facilities.**
- **Close playground.**
- **Park in every other spot.**
- **No one exchanges anything between cars.**
- **Consider online giving platforms and encourage people to give electronically or mail offerings to the church.**
- **No bulletins.**

# Staff and Volunteers

- **Meet with all staff and volunteers prior to re-opening. Offer grace to anyone not comfortable serving.**
- **Limit volunteers to those without preexisting conditions and who are under 65.**
- **Consider asking clergy, staff, and volunteers to take their temperature before going to the building and to stay home if their temperature is elevated.**
- **Require staff and volunteers to stay home when sick.**
- **Use flexibility, when possible, to allow staff to stay home to care for sick family or household members or care for church.**
- **Set up flexible worship hours and schedules to limit the number of people who must gather at one time.**
- **Staff and volunteers who are well but are taking care of, or share a home with, a person who is a confirmed or suspected COVID-19 case should stay home and follow instructions from local health officials to determine when they can return.**

# Sunday School/Small Groups

- **Create contingency plans minimizing large gatherings.**

A few considerations: maintain online services, continue online committee meetings and small groups throughout the week, consider drive-in worship initially.

- **Decide whether you will have Sunday school or small groups.**
- **Eliminate the use of handouts and study books.**  
Whenever possible, use online resources.
- **Consider dividing your groups to maintain social distancing standards, especially if your classrooms are small.**
- **If your classes meet in person, have a plan to clean the doorknobs, water fountains (if they have not been disabled), and other high traffic areas between uses.**
- **Decide whether to hold mid-week Wednesday night services, meals, and Bible studies.**
- **Decide whether you will continue hosting special events such as luncheons, weddings, funerals, children's programs/choir, etc.**  
Any such events must comply with currently effective maximum number of participants, and adhere to strict social distancing.
- **If your space does not allow for social distancing and if you cannot properly sanitize it before the gathering, you should continue to suspend in-person gathering of the group.**
- **Consider meeting outside and asking people to bring their own chairs and Bibles. This allows for social distancing and reduces the need for sanitizing the space.**
- **Consider high-traffic areas. Plan for ways to reduce bottlenecks and crowded halls.**

# Nurseries and Children's Ministries

- **The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children 2 years of age and under do not wear masks or face coverings. Please keep this in mind as you make decisions.**
- **Determine if you will continue offering children's church, classes, and/or nursery when you first start back.**
  - We recommend you not offer nursery, and in-person preschool or children ministries until your area schools open.
- **Involve parents in planning to hear their concerns and gain their involvement. Be sure to communicate your plan to parents so they know what to expect when you return.**
- **Consider pre-registering children (RSVP) to limit how many are in any room at one time.**
- **Limit leaders in the preschool and children's areas to those who do not have pre-existing conditions and/or are not over 65 years old.**
- **Have extra volunteers available in the preschool ministry where some children may suffer from separation anxiety after only being with parents for a long time.**
- **Consider adjustments to child check-in procedures.**
- **Prepare and utilize a checklist of what has been cleaned and when in each room.**
- **Develop a list of procedures for your volunteers. Host a meeting with volunteers to discuss safety procedures for reopening in this environment.**
- **Determine what you will do about camps and VBS, possibly canceling or delaying until later in the summer if/when it is safe to do so.**

# Preschools and Mother's Day Out

As a starting point, remember most day care centers follow a policy of mirroring the local school system's decisions about opening and closing. That is, if schools are closed, generally speaking, the day care centers will be closed too. Churches should carefully consider whether or not they want to open their day care centers even if the local schools are closed. Of course, these are unprecedented times, and to provide ministry where it is needed most (e.g., to children of first responders and other providers of essential services), the day cares may wish to be open, even if schools are closed. It should be a conscious, "eyes wide open," determination.

If a church day care center decides to reopen, or to remain open, then, in order to be in compliance with applicable governmental requirements, the facility:

- **Must practice enhanced sanitation and social distancing practices in accordance with CDC and ADPH (Alabama Department of Public Health) guidance, including:**

- Wash hands with soap and water.
- Use alcohol-based hand sanitizers if handwashing is not possible.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue, or cough or sneeze into your elbow.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth with unwashed hands.
- Stay home when sick.
- Stay away from people who are sick.

- **Churches which operate day care facilities must be sure to obtain adequate cleaning supplies, and they must clean their space thoroughly, prior to opening each day.**

Also, after closing, staff must clean again in preparation for the next day. Throughout each day, adequate staff must be available to regularly clean and sanitize the rooms where children are present, including all bathrooms.

- **Especially if more rooms than usual are required to ensure 12 or more children are not housed in a single space, train all workers (whether paid staff or volunteers) on the church safe sanctuaries policy after they have received a clean background check report.**
- **In addition, before being allowed to work in day care centers, employees and volunteers should sign a statement attesting that, to their knowledge, they have not been in contact with anyone who has tested positive for COVID-19, and that they have adhered to all applicable "stay at home" orders and other directives and guidance.**
- **For day care centers within the Birmingham city limits, all teachers and students over the age of two (2), are required to wear masks, beginning on May 1, 2020. Medical necessities may ameliorate this requirement to some extent, but this will be the general rule.**
- **Parents and guardians should not be allowed inside any day care facilities. Drop off and pick up must happen curb side, with workers/volunteers available to escort the children to their rooms.**
- **Finally, day care centers should be mindful of employing or engaging workers or volunteers who themselves may be vulnerable to coronavirus or other respiratory diseases.**

## Choirs and Praise Bands

- **Praise Teams:** Do not use the full team. Consider rotations. Assign microphones and use the same one every time.
- **Choir:** Consider suspending choir practices as forceful breathing and exhaling can expel the virus further if someone is infected. Consider using fewer choir members as you reintroduce choir to the service. Also, space members out appropriately (consider using a diamond pattern with six feet of spacing between members).
- Consider not using choir robes as space for robe changing may be limited. Just as healthcare workers change or wash their coats after each use, so should the robes be washed.
- Wipe down music stands after each use.
- Dismiss the choir in a fashion to allow social distancing.

## Tech Teams

- Clean microphones, headphones, computers, laptops, etc. after every use. Keep a record of when each item was cleaned. DO NOT use water. Rubbing alcohol or alcohol-based cleaners are best.
- Rotate your tech team if possible. Again, encourage those who feel sick or tired to not serve.
- Keep offering online services. Facebook may be more accessible as many people have accounts, but consider other options like YouTube for those who prefer to watch on their smart televisions.
- Consider projecting liturgies, song lyrics, scriptures, and sermon guides. Secure a CCLI license for copyright compliance if you do.

# What to Do if Someone Becomes Sick or When a Person with a Confirmed COVID-19 Case Has Been in Your Community

- Read the CDC Interim Guidance for Administrators and Leaders of Community- and Faith-Based Organizations to Plan, Prepare, and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 for details on how to respond (COVID-19)  
[www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/guidance-community-faith-organizations.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/guidance-community-faith-organizations.html)
- Cancel all activities and close the building.
- Immediately contact local health officials and coordinate with them.
- Clean and disinfect thoroughly.
- Communicate with staff, volunteers, members, visitors, and the people you serve.
- Make decisions in consultation with local health officials about extending the closure of, or limited access to, the facility.

# References

CDC—Interim Guidance for Administrators and Leaders of Community- and Faith-Based Organizations to Plan, Prepare, and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)

[www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/guidance-community-faith-organizations.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/guidance-community-faith-organizations.html)

CDC Instructions for Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility

[www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html)

List of Persons At Higher Risk

[www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-at-higher-risk.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-at-higher-risk.html)

Alabama COVID-19 Case Tracker Look particularly at new cases per day and your county statistics

[www.BamaTracker.com](http://www.BamaTracker.com)

Alabama Safer at Home Order

[www.alabamapublichealth.gov/news/2020/04/28c.html](http://www.alabamapublichealth.gov/news/2020/04/28c.html)

Singing and the Church: A Caution for Moving Forward in Our Current Pandemic

[www.drheathnelson.com/singingandcovid19](http://www.drheathnelson.com/singingandcovid19)

Smaller Churches and Re-Opening Our Doors

[www.saranavefisher.com/2020/04/25/small-churches-and-re-opening-our-doors/](http://www.saranavefisher.com/2020/04/25/small-churches-and-re-opening-our-doors/)

First Sunday Back: Some Questions to Ponder

[www.saranavefisher.com/2020/04/25/small-churches-and-re-opening-our-doors/](http://www.saranavefisher.com/2020/04/25/small-churches-and-re-opening-our-doors/)

When We Return

[www.umcdiscipleship.org/blog/when-we-return](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/blog/when-we-return)

24 Questions Your Church Should Answer Before People Return

[www.kenbraddy.com/2020/04/18/20-questions-your-church-should-answer-before-people-return](http://www.kenbraddy.com/2020/04/18/20-questions-your-church-should-answer-before-people-return)