



The Kentucky Council of Churches

“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 Kentuckians consider 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:** 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, and in stating that 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 both caution and care in every proposed gathering.
- 2) **“HOW” first, not “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 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 you to be especially attentive to the anxieties of those whose piety may be at odds with their safety and the safety of others. 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. We also are deeply aware of the potential for division among those who may attend services, and those who feel left out because they feel they cannot. Attending to the needs of anyone uncomfortable with or unable to attend worship is an important shepherding task in this time.
- 5) **Phased In Meetings, Classes, Groups:** If after careful planning for safety, it may be possible for churches to consider in-person small groups. Again, this may or may not be possible in all settings. 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, worship. All of the considerations provided by your association, denomination, or regional leadership should be attended to. All of the “Healthy at Work” and our proposed “Healthy at Worship” guidelines apply to all settings of church gatherings, 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) **Masks Should be Worn by All:** All persons to 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.
 - b) **Sanitize Surfaces:** All surfaces including door handles, lightswitches, tabletops, chairs, etc should be disinfected before and after meetings. A plan to disinfect each restroom after each use is strongly encouraged.
 - c) **Maintain 6’ Distance From Others:** Maintaining 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 planned, 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 needs to be in place.

- d) **Prohibit Singing:** 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.
- e) **Prohibit Sharing of food:** Best practice is for participants to bring their own. 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.
- f) **Cancel Child Care:** 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.
- g) **Prepare to Adapt To Changing Conditions:** It seems clear that there will be no quick return to previous normal. There is much we do not know about the course of this disease, and thus we must remain flexible and adaptive to changing conditions and information. Treatment options, or increasing population resistance may allow for more relaxed guidance in the future. But by the same token, if local or regional increases of infection occur, it may be necessary to again stop all in-person gatherings. 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.

Additional considerations are provided below in the addenda. A check list 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 that St. Paul also encourages us with these words "in all these things we are more than conquerors," and "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 centuries.

_____End of First Draft_____

Material below is unedited Addenda

It may be included, or provided as a link.

Kent is also working on a Healthy at Worship bullet-point graphic.

Addendum: Questions for Preparation:

Checklist of Questions for Church as House of Worship:

As you think about the vulnerable individuals in your congregation, you might begin to ask:

- What portion of the congregation would be considered vulnerable individuals or households?
- Of those most vulnerable, how many would feel they should be at church and in worship if they know the doors are open?
- Are the pastors, elders, and other leaders vulnerable individuals?
- What special considerations are needed for these people in order for them to participate in worship or other activities even though they still need to be healthy at home?
- What plans do we need should the pastor become infected or be required to quarantine?

1. How is our congregation addressing the mandatory wearing of face masks?
 - a. Are we asking people to bring their own?
 - b. Are we providing them? Where are we obtaining them?
 - c. What if someone won't wear one? Will we ask them to leave?
2. What about temperature and/or pulse oximeter checks for worshipers?
 - a. Where do we obtain equipment? And who will use it?
 - b. How do we insure confidentiality of screening information?
 - c. Do we simply notify those feeling ill to stay at home and post "stop if you feel ill" signs on the exterior doors of church?
3. What about hand sanitizing stations?
 - a. Hand sanitizer at every door? Ends of each pew?
4. What about vulnerable populations (65+ and those with underlying health conditions)?
 - a. Are we encouraging them to continue to worship digitally and not in-person?
 - b. Will we have special worship times for vulnerable populations?
 - c. Will we use drive-in/drive-up worship as a safer in-person alternative to worship?
5. What about social distancing (72" between worshiper requirements)?
 - a. Sanctuaries with appropriate social distancing will only accommodate 25% of pre-Covid-19 occupancy. Will the sanctuary be big enough to safely accommodate worshippers?
 - b. How will the socially distanced seating be marked?

- c. Will there need to be additional worship services to accommodate in-person worshippers? Or will there be “overflow” live streaming sites (chapels, fellowship halls) in addition to worship in the sanctuary?
 - d. Will in-person worshippers be turned away once socially distanced seating is full? Who will do this? How?
 - e. How will congregations in need of multiple services try to stagger crowds? Will worship be by reserved time only? How will this information be collected and communicated? First-come, first-served basis, or will the church assign worship times by last name or some other manner?
 - f. Would outdoor worship be a good alternative to in-person worship inside the sanctuary?
6. Exterior and interior sanctuary doors should remain open for the entire morning, even in inclement weather to increase air exchange from the outside and to keep people from having to touch the doors.
- a. How will you accomplish this? Can doors be physically latched open? Volunteers with gloves?
7. What adjustments will you make to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper?
- a. No passing of open elements down the pews.
 - b. No intinction (dipping of bread into the cup).
 - c. Pre-filled sealed communion cups and wafers are available for purchase.
 - d. Pastor or Elder distributing bread with gloved hands and/or using tongs to people who have come forward to the table.
 - e. Pastor or Elder distributing individual cups with gloved hands who have come forward to the table.
8. What adjustments will you make to the celebration of Baptism?
- a. Have parents hold the child and have the parents distribute the water as the pastor proclaims the Trinitarian formula.
 - b. What about elder sponsors?
9. What about congregational singing?
- a. Vapor particles are spread profusely and are propelled for much further than 6 ft when we sing. Therefore, congregational singing during worship should be avoided?
 - b. It is uncomfortable to sing while wearing a face mask.
 - c. How can music be incorporated into worship?
 - i. Humming?

ii. Playing hymn tracks/videos?

10. What about choir?

- a. See issues with congregational singing above. No large group choirs.
- b. What about solos, married couples/partner duets, quartets/octets with individuals spaced 10 ft or more apart in a vacant section of the sanctuary.
- c. How can instrumental music be maximized and used in new a creative ways?

11. How will the church “pass the peace”?

- a. Remove it?
- b. Bowing/Prayer hands/Peace sign hands with everyone staying where they are and turning to their left and right, front and back?

12. Is a physical “pass the plate” a thing of the past?

- a. There should be no passing the place: place an offering plate/box/receptable at the sanctuary exits as in Calvin’s Geneva.
- b. Consider a giving kiosk or a dedicated iPad or “Dipjar” (www.dipjar.com)
- c. Continue online offering, intensify promotion of online giving
- d. Encourage a consideration of other ways that people make an offering?

13. What about children’s sermons?

- a. Probably should be discontinued if there are more than 2-3.
- b. Can the children’s sermon be given to the whole congregation as the “children of God”?

14. What about officer ordination/installation?

- a. Laying on of hand will need to be discontinued.
- b. Could officers and/or all the congregants be encouraged to lay on hands at a distance by raising them toward the officers during prayer?

15. What about virtual online worship?

- a. Yes, weekly digital worship should be the new normal
- b. Given the new responsibilities on pastors for weekly digital worship, what duties will the session take away from the pastor’s job description to allow sufficient time to provide online worship?

16. What about shortening worship services?

- a. Churches with multiple Sunday morning worship services should consider shortening them to 45 minutes in order to make sure there is social distancing as one worship service ends and another begins.

17. What about door greeters and ushers?

- a. Adopt the Walmart strategy: greeters/ushers do not shake hands ever.
- b. Make sure greeter/ushers know what the safety protocols and expectations are and how they are to be followed. Will they be taking temperatures of worshippers entering?
- c. Train greeter/ushers so that they become the folks to orient worshippers to “how to do worship”
- d. Bulletins, if used, should be stacked on a table. Greeters/ushers may remind worshippers to pick up their bulletins themselves.

18. What about exiting the sanctuary to insure proper social distancing?

- a. How do you need to think about getting people out safely?
- b. No shaking the pastor’s hand.
- c. No coffee hour.

19. Check with your congregation’s insurance provider and discuss with them risk management and liability issues as pertains to the church and worshippers.

Checklist of Questions for the Church as Employer:

1. Churches are small business and as such should adhere to the “Healthy at Work” guidelines for employees and volunteers.” What staff can continue to telework? What additional modifications may need to be put in place to facilitate long-term telework until a vaccine is found?
2. How will you communicate with employees, and how will you phase a return?
3. How will you perform onsite temperature/health checks and yet still protect the privacy of the employee? Do you need to purchase a “thermometer gun,” or a “pulse oximeter”?
4. Will you provide masks for employees? Where will you obtain masks?
5. How will you limit face-to-face meetings? Will you still do staff meetings by video conferencing?
6. Touchless hand-sanitizer/hand wash stations where will you establish them? Do you have enough hand sanitizer? Where will you obtain items?
7. How are you caring for employees who are 65+ years old and those with preexisting medical conditions? Will you provide special work accommodations for them?

8. How will you notify your employees about the Families First Coronavirus Response Act: Employee Paid Leave Rights? How will the session/personnel committee be made aware of these new legal requirements (that include churches) through December 31, 2020?

<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/pandemic/ffcra-employee-paid-leave>

9. What is your plan for staff (14-day) quarantine should an employee test positive for Covid-19 after returning to work?

10. Contact your congregation's insurance provider and discuss with them risk management and liability issues as pertains to the church as an employer.

11. How will you communicate to the congregation that the church doors will remain closed and locked for non-staff on weekdays during phase one?

12. Have you identified a place for immediate testing of any employee who shows signs of infection?

As you think about planning for in-person worship:

Worship

Christian Education

1. Can you insure social distancing for Sunday School classes? Will children be able to stay 6 ft. away from others?

a. No nursery.

b. Online Christian Education may be the best option to start with.

2. What are you going to do about VBS, summer camps, etc.?

3. What about youth group?

a. Can the youth meet in ways that permit social distancing?

Fellowship and Pastoral Care

1. Do you have a regular, systematic plan in place to connect with and check in on every member at least once every two-weeks?

2. Online fellowship groups continue.

3. Fellowship meals will probably not resume until much later.

4. How can pastors discuss openly the realities of addictions/mental illness/domestic abuse and provide appropriate referrals?
5. What about a text-in, phone-in prayer request line?

Buildings and Grounds

1. What are you doing to sanitize and clean between services and in real time?
2. What supplies do you need?
 - a. Hand Sanitizer
 - b. Face masks
 - c. Gloves
 - d. Pre-filled communion cups
 - e. Other
3. What about Sunday morning “cleaning teams” in addition to mid-week cleanings by the custodian?

Stewardship and Finances

1. Have you established and publicized online giving?
2. Have you asked members to keep up their pledge and/or give to the church?
3. Have you encouraged members who can to tithe their stimulus checks?

Mercy Ministries

1. Have you found way to adapt and continue your congregation’s mercy ministries of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, etc.?
2. What new needs are arising in light of the pandemic that your congregation can actively address?

Thoughts and Notes:

- Best recommend:
 - Continue to conduct remote services, adn will save lives. In person will increase transmission.

- WEddings, funerals, family baptisms. Not in person worship. Up to 20 people at social distance with masks.
 - Make checklist? Will guide some and daunt others.
- Theological notes:
 - Lay down our lives for others
 - Worship is in spirit and in truth, not on this mountain or that one.
 - Christian Theology Rejects “acceptable loss” theory
- Requirements:
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 - No food service. No shared eucharist. No coffee hour.
 - 6’ distance / 20% of capacity.
 - All surfaces sanitized before and after: pews, tables, handrails
 - One way in, different way out. And Ushers to maintain that flow. Also to count and regulate.
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- ICU numbers go Down, not up.