

Continuing guidance for congregations in the Pandemic Urgent Advice Regarding COVID-19 Precautions

To: Sessions and Congregations of Scioto Valley Presbytery (PSV)

From: The PSV Coordinating Team

Recently, the State of Ohio has seen a marked spike in COVID-19 infections, resulting in hospitalizations and deaths at their highest rate since late May. The coronavirus is spreading at critical levels in every county of our Presbytery. Because of this recent spike some public schools have suspended in-person learning. We encourage our churches to do so as well. The Center for Disease Control warns that the nation is on a pace to generate over 400,000 new COVID-19 cases a day by March 1. If we do not act to contain this spike through vigilant and sustained efforts that include masking, social distancing, disinfection, and restricting unnecessary meetings and travel, hospitals may become overloaded and thousands may die.

While we have heard encouraging news regarding the development of vaccines, the logistics of approval, manufacture, distribution, and administration suggest that the pandemic will continue to pose a threat well into 2021. The Presbytery Coordinating Team has consistently urged Sessions and congregations to heed the orders of state and county public health officials regarding public meetings, including worship assemblies.

These orders currently restrict meetings to no more than 10 persons in most indoor spaces, and no more than 20% of fixed seating capacity (or 20 persons per 1,000 square feet in rooms with non-fixed seating) in larger venues. These guidelines also presume and require that all other protocols, including masking and social distancing, be observed. As of this writing, these guidelines have not changed. However, due to the high risk posed to vulnerable individuals in certain groups – including the elderly and those with certain preexisting conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, and chronic lung disorders – we urge Sessions and congregations to exercise greater caution than what is allowed by public health guidelines.

This should include temporarily suspending in-person worship activities and returning to online-only worship. A common question is “How do we know when it is safe to meet in person, or necessary to suspend in-person activities?” <https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/static/OPHASM/COVID-19-Risk-Level-Guidelines-GP.pdf> provides guidance through the level-color system that is shared each week during the Governor’s briefing sessions.

The Presbytery Coordinating Team recommends monitoring daily a website such as <https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/> and adopting the following guidelines based on county-level statistics.

At the time of this writing, most counties within the bounds of the Presbytery are registering "red," meaning it is unsafe to conduct in-person activities, even with safety protocols. We recognize that no one standard fits all situations. The demographics of individual congregations, the size of your sanctuary, local infection rates, and the awareness of infections among church members or staff may lead you to be more or less restrictive at any given time. If churches have not already done so, it would be timely for Sessions to adopt a policy for when to discontinue in-person worship and establish a "re-closing" strategy that includes a process to notify members of the status of worship gatherings with the reasons for any changes. Having a policy might make it easier to address resistance from members who do not understand the severity of the risk to themselves and others.

Likewise, it is our abiding conviction and hope that Sessions should and will respect the conscience of pastoral leaders who, during this pandemic, believe it is unsafe for them to engage in activities or to perform services at which they may become infected. Some pastors may themselves have medical conditions putting them in high-risk categories or must interact with others who do. We strongly believe they should be given the right either to abstain from that activity or service or be given the opportunity to find a safer alternative means of participation.

To summarize:

- Infection rates are now at a critical level making in-person gatherings unsafe.
- Sessions should adopt policies with parameters for closing and re-opening in-person activities including a process for congregational notification.
- Sessions should respect the conscience of pastors who believe it unsafe to engage in in-person activities and should provide them the opportunity to find a safer means of participation.

"Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." – Luke 2:10-11

This year will be different from previous years.

Although our celebrations may change, Christmas is not canceled.

Christ is born!

May you remain safe, remain well, and remain secure in the knowledge of the love of God in these difficult times.