

TRANSYLVANIA PRESBYTERY PHASE 1 GUIDANCE FOR RESUMING IN-PERSON WORSHIP

At his daily press conference on April 30th, Governor Beshear announced that churches may resume in-person worship as of May 20th. While we know everyone is excited and eager to get back to normal, we must caution that ***what we knew as normal has ceased to exist***. Our focus will be helping you transition to a new normal for now, yet even that will be a work in progress. Until we have a robust testing and tracing program, a vaccine, and effective treatments, large gatherings without proper precautions will continue to be ill-advised and risk our members' lives. We are committed to helping you resume activities in ways that will be as safe and healthy as possible. What follows are recommendations for Phase 1 only. We would expect these to stay in place until at least July 1st. As we get closer to this date, we will develop and release Phase 2 guidelines. With so many variables still to be determined, we want to see how things progress before making any kind of Phase 2 recommendations. If the conditions change before then, we will make an announcement at that time.

"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

While it's true that the state has deemed it appropriate to consider resuming in-person worship beginning May 20th, it's worth considering whether or not that is a wise idea. Smaller churches may be able to appropriately socially distance themselves from one another and retain a high percentage of their worshipping population, many of our larger churches will not. Churches with large attendance should strongly consider monitoring the progress of the virus before resuming in-person worship. Churches with a majority of members in a high-risk category (65+, underlying health issues such as heart, lung or liver disorders, etc.) may want to wait until it's safer to resume in-person worship. We will support any Session that determines that they cannot provide a safe or healthy environment and choose to postpone gathering for worship until a time where they can ensure the relative safety of those gathering.

Any resumption of activities at the church will have some risk involved. Even if you are perfect with your protocols, someone infected with Covid-19, symptomatic or not, may attend your worship service. The more people you have in worship, the higher the risk will be. Even the smallest churches, however, will have risk. For this reason, we suggest taking a picture of the congregation gathered for worship. In a worst-case scenario, where someone becomes infected, you will be able to review who they may have contacted and inform those who may be impacted. We trust your Session will take this risk into account when determining when and how to begin resuming in-person worship and other gatherings. At the end of the day, your Session is responsible for the saints that gather. We trust you will work through the challenges you are facing, come up with a detailed plan and follow that plan.

If you absolutely feel you must return to in-person worship

After considering the CDC guidelines, multiple judicatory documents, the Kentucky Council of Church recommendations and many others, we offer the following **10 Commandments of Resuming In-person Worship** (in no particular order):

1. "THOU SHALT NOT MAKE PHYSICAL CONTACT WITH ANYONE"

Attendees should refrain from hugging, shaking hands, kissing or any other type of physical contact. Worship services that practice the "Passing of the Peace" should do so in "contact-free" way.

2. "THOU SHALT NOT PASS AN OFFERING PLATE, COMMUNION PLATE OR ANY OTHER ITEM BETWEEN PEOPLE"

The modes by which churches take offerings should be modified to eliminate the passing of the plate among worshippers. Consider setting up a station at the entrance of the sanctuary or in an area that is uncluttered for people to make their offering. Online giving should be strongly encouraged. Communion should be modified to eliminate the passing of trays as well as any method where people would come in contact with one another.

3. "THOU SHALT WEAR A FACE COVERING AT ALL TIMES WHEN IN THE CHURCH BUILDING"

While we cannot reduce the risk of transmitting the virus to zero, when each person wears a face covering, it dramatically reduces the rate of spread. We do this out of love and respect for one another. Churches should consider having face coverings to distribute to those who are unable to find one. Those unable or unwilling to use a face covering should be strongly discouraged from entering the building. Pastors and Church leaders should set the example by always wearing a face covering when interacting with church members.

4. "THOU SHALT NOT SING IN WORSHIP"

Singing is one of the most dangerous group activities in terms of spreading the virus. There have been numerous instances of church choirs decimated by the virus. However, the song in our heart shall not be diminished. We encourage musicians and worship leaders to consider types of special music other than singing

5. "THOU SHALT NOT HAVE COFFEE HOUR BEFORE OR AFTER WORSHIP"

Fellowship times will encourage people to linger and gather in ways that are still potentially dangerous.

6. "THOU SHALT MEET FOR WORSHIP ONLY"

Resuming worship is the first step. While the state is relaxing social gatherings of 10 or less, we recommend waiting before resuming small group activities at the church.

7. "THOU SHALT NOT EXCEED 25% MAXIMUM OCCUPANCY IN THE SANCTUARY"

This is the state mandated maximum for resuming in-person worship. Count all the possible seats in your worship space and simply divide by 4. That number will be the maximum you should have in worship at any one time. For example, if you can seat 100 in

your sanctuary (100/4), then you are limited to 25 people in worship. Larger churches may want to have multiple services on a Sunday to accommodate more worshippers. Care should be given to account for the time it takes for people to enter and leave buildings in order to minimize the amount and duration of contact between people.

8. "THOU SHALT NOT ATTEND IF YOU (OR AN IMMEDIATE FAMILY MEMBER) ARE FEELING UNWELL OR IN A VULNERABLE CATEGORY"

We must protect one another until we know our presence won't make someone else sick. Since many people are asymptomatic, showing no symptoms of the virus, we want to avoid unintentionally infecting someone who is vulnerable or someone who has a vulnerable person at home who refrained from attending in person to be safe.

9. "THOU SHALT CONTINUE TO PROVIDE AN ONLINE WORSHIP EXPERIENCE AND LIFT UP THE ABSENT"

*No matter your size, it is unlikely that your normal worshipping community will be able to gather at one time or that everyone will feel comfortable gathering in a larger group due to their own risk factors. In order to make sure we are maintaining inclusivity, we would ask that you continue to offer online worship services, live or recorded, for those who are unable or unwilling to gather in person. Many congregants will not feel safe in attending, and some should actually be discouraged from physically attending. Every effort should be made to make them feel supported in being safe at home. **Be intentional in lifting them up during worship and including them.***

10. "THOU SHALT DISINFECT ALL SURFACES BEFORE AND AFTER (OR BETWEEN) ANY GATHERING"

We know the virus can linger for hours and sometimes days on many types of surfaces. Plans should be made to wipe down hard surfaces with some type of disinfectant wipe or spray to ensure the healthiest environment for staff and other entering the facility after Sunday.

These are simple guidelines. We strongly suggest you contact your county health department and share these or other guidelines you develop for their input. We would also advise you to contact your insurance carrier to check on any liability issues that may be involved. Just remember if you vote on or publish any protocols, you must adhere to them. Ignoring them once you've adopted them is a sure-fire way to create liability on behalf of the church.

A final word or two. The 10 guidelines are meant to be simple. Implementing them, however, is not easy. For each guideline, there are a number of logistics necessary to make them successful. Reducing contact and interaction in worship isn't easy. Most churches have one, two, or more entrances to the building and sanctuary. That means entrances and exits pose a particular challenge to maintain social distancing. Parking can be tricky as well. Worshippers will need to maintain distancing even in parking lots. How will you maintain the proper occupancy in the sanctuary? Will people need to RSVP to worship? Will ushers gently turn people away when capacity is reached? What other considerations are unique to your congregation and must be considered before resuming worship? These are all tough issues and require Sessions to have tough, thoughtful, and thorough conversations.