

EMBRACE THE NOW, PREPARE FOR THE NEXT: A PLAN FOR RESUMING IN-PERSON WORSHIP IN THE VIRGINIA CONFERENCE

May 13, 2020

We are in the midst of an historic, disruptive time as our nation and our churches have responded to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. We have learned how God can work in us and how we can be church without the church building. Though these have been painful times, we embrace the new things we have learned and the practices that have sustained us.

As we prepare for the next stages in our journey with God, we want to remember John Wesley's 3 Simple Rules:

Do No Harm—We recognize that the following plan and its supporting material may seem cumbersome, restrictive, and even somewhat scary. However, we are outlining these details because we value the health and wellbeing of all God's people, especially the vulnerable ones. As churches, we pray that no one will be endangered or placed at unnecessary risk, just as we desire that others would do the same to us (Luke 6:31).

Do Good— By implementing the following plan, with God's help, we seek to do all the good we can to others. This is our prayerful effort to spread God's love, not harm. To this end, we submit ourselves to Spirit-led self-discipline (2 Tim. 1:7) so that others may be blessed by our love-filled actions.

Stay in Love with God —We long for the return to in-person worship as one of the most important means of staying in love with God (Jn. 4:23-24, Heb. 10:25). In order to offer this precious means of grace in the safest possible way, we have relied on the best wisdom we can glean from medical, church, governmental, and legal resources. We offer the following plan, praying that in coming weeks and years more and more people will come to know the love of God and passionately stay in it.

We will resume in-person worship gradually and with great care. Even when we move into more moderate restrictions, we recognize that regional outbreaks may require some or all of our churches to return to more severe restrictions. Based on the severity of the outbreak in a particular district or a part of a district, District Superintendents may use their discretion in delaying implementation of any stage below until conditions allow.

As of May 13, 2020, the Northern Virginia region will stay in the Commonwealth's Phase 0 and they will not be moving into Stage 1, as defined below.

We are confident, however, that we can work together, building on where we have been and preparing for what comes next.

Preparation Stage

Timeline: Immediately

Worship Options: No in-person worship, Online/conference call worship
Development of Healthy Church Team - Consideration of willingness/ability to be a pioneer church

All Churches will create a **Healthy Church Team (HCT)** to prepare for the time when they are able to offer in-person worship [Attachment A]. Some churches have already been doing great work to prepare and their existing teams should continue as an HCT. The HCT will provide advice and counsel to the lead Pastor and the Chair of Trustees, Church Council, and S/PPRC. The HCT should include representatives of the Trustees and the Hospitality/Greeters Team, the Pastor, a medical professional, a lawyer, and others as needed. In churches where there are no medical professionals or lawyers, outside consultancy should be sought.

Requirements, rules, protocols, and guidelines for HCTs can be found in the Handbook for Healthy Church Teams on the Virginia Conference website at: www.vaumc.org/ return. All HCTs must adhere to this document.

The Healthy Church Team will coordinate with the pastors, staff, volunteers, and the District Superintendent on a number of issues associated with creating a plan for in-person worship. Consideration should be given to preparing the building, accommodating worship to strict distancing (6 feet or more) and sanitation protocols [Attachment C], and communicating plans with the congregation and community. Churches should determine their readiness, willingness, and ability to move to different forms of worship, including whether they can be a pioneer church. **No churches will conduct in-person worship during this Preparation Stage.**

Definition: Pioneer churches are those churches that agree to follow the strict distancing and sanitation protocols [Attachment C], to move gradually into in-person worship during Stage 1, and to communicate their learnings and best practices. Churches should indicate to the District Superintendent their willingness to be considered for this role. After sharing their plans for approval with the DS, a small initial number of churches will be selected in Stage 1 with the number expanding as we learn.

Stage 1 Timeline: May 24 (except Northern Virginia and other regions where District Superintendent discerns need to delay)

Worship Options: **Drive-In Worship, Online/conference call services, and Pioneer Churches Only**

- A. Drive-In Worship—Beginning on May 24, 2020, every church that wants to have members gather in the church parking lot or any other parking lot, must follow the Drive-In Worship requirements [Attachment B]

- B. Online/Conference Call Services—If the church is already conducting online services, are there other ministries that can be conducted using Livestream, Zoom or conference calls?
- C. Pioneer Churches—During this Phase, gatherings will be restricted to 25 persons or less (Clergy, worship leaders, and other assistants excluded). Note that this is a more restricted number than the allowable gathering size in the state guidelines. A small number of churches representing different regions, facilities, and congregational sizes that have indicated their willingness and ability to act as pioneer churches will be asked to begin enacting the plans developed during the Preparation Phase using the Strict Protocol Guidelines [See Attachment C]. Churches may experiment with gatherings on multiple days and, if the church campus allows, multiple services of 25 or less held simultaneously in different parts of the building, ensuring no commingling of participants. As we continue to learn from these churches during this phase, other churches may be added. Churches operating in this phase would agree to:
- Begin with Soft Start Experiences (invited persons to run through a test service) on weeknights
 - Hold a Service of Word and Table at least once in this phase
 - Solicit input and identify issues
 - Monitor Implementation of requirements in Handbook for Healthy Church Team on the Conference Website
 - Report to Council and District Superintendent
 - Weekly Zoom meeting with DS and clergy/lay church leaders of pioneer churches and other churches preparing to re-open in future phases to report on issues/learnings/best practices and any COVID-19 exposure reported by congregants or staff
 - District Superintendents will communicate progress with the Assistant to the Bishop.

Stage 2 Timeline: TBD Determined by Bishop but subsequent to Governor’s announcement that the state is moving into Phase 2

Worship Options: **Drive-In Worship, Online/conference call services, and Additional Churches meeting**

- A. All churches with Average Worship Attendance of 50 or less could resume worship following Strict Protocol [Attachment C]
- B. Additional medium and large churches as solicited and identified by District Superintendents could also meet using the gathering rule of ‘50 or less’
- C. No Church should feel obligated to open.
- D. Virtual service options should be maintained.

Stage 3 Timeline: TBD Determined by Bishop but subsequent to Governor's announcement that the state is moving into Phase 3

Worship Options: All Churches can resume worship in accordance with prevailing state gathering restrictions using the New Normal Protocol [Attachment D]

The Bishop's Back to In-Person Worship Workgroup

The Rev. Alex Joyner, Eastern Shore DS, chair

Mr. Steve Brown, Conference Chancellor

The Rev. Jay Carey, pastor, Bethia UMC, Chesterfield, DS Designate

The Rev. Douglas Forrester, pastor, Reveille UMC, Richmond, DS Designate

The Rev. Seonyoung Kim, York River DS

The Rev. Brenda Laws, deacon, Eastern Shore District

The Rev. Dr. Hyo Lee, pastor, Sudley UMC, Manassas, DS Designate

Dr. Karen McElfish, Arlington District Lay Leader, pediatrician

Dr. George Moxley, physician and rheumatologist, VCU

The Rev. Wayne Snead, Elizabeth River DS

Mr. Neal Wise, Annual Conference Event Coordinator

Healthy Church Team Preparation Phase — Attachment A

(to be used in conjunction with Strict Protocol —Attachment C)

- **What have we learned?**

- Ask the team to assess the ministry of the church during the shutdown period
- What did we learn to do differently?
- What blessings did God send to us?
- What gifts did we have that we didn't know we had?
- What are we doing that we want to keep doing?
- What things that we used to do can we stop doing?

- **Assessment of Volunteers and Staff**

- **Cleaning Plan**

- Clean the Church or confirm that it has been cleaned since it was closed
- Reduce touchable items in all areas
- Reduce number of toys
- Clean and disinfect toys
- Hand sanitizer at entrances/exits if possible and ask members to bring their own hand sanitizer
- Cleaning between worship services (if applicable) and it will only involve wiping down common surfaces.
- Clean handrails, tables and chairs, bathrooms, backs of pews
- Turn off water fountains
- Clean AV and computer equipment
- Cleaning Products
- Minimizing reasons persons would touch surfaces (doorknobs, etc.) while in the building - leaving some doors open during services

- **Physical Distancing Plan [6 feet or more)**

- How to maintain distancing entrances, sanctuary, restroom, narthex, and overflow areas
- Monitoring persons to help keep physical distancing
- Reduce length of worship services to allow for congregants to come and go safely (if applicable)

- **Check with Liability Insurer for implications of your plans**

- **Develop a Plan for Ministry with the most vulnerable (seniors, chronic health conditions, special needs, etc.)**

- Develop programs/care networks to keep them engaged
- Determine if a special service day and time can be used

- **Continue streaming worship, devotionals, and Bible Study**
- **Develop Missional Plan for New Persons**
 - How will your church accommodate visitors/new persons?
 - Will you have designated worship participants who will voluntarily exit a service to accommodate them?
 - How will you plan for ongoing contact with new persons?
- **Communication Plan**
 - Allow time for congregants to build trust and process the reopening plan
 - Multi Soft Opening Experiences during weekdays
 - Walk-through video of what the new normal will be like
 - Signage Plan (Inside and Outside) including physical distancing (6 feet or more)
 - Types of signage: Directional, washing hands/sanitizer locations, seating
- **Development of an Emergency Preparation Plan considering the following:**
 - an isolation or holding room for those who are symptomatic
 - contact information for medical professionals and local public health authority, 911 address of the church, local emergency departments, in a visible place in the church
 - procedure to accommodate for volunteers who are absent
 - develop 'low/no touch' procedure for collecting contact info of participants in church services for contact tracing in event of an outbreak
 - communicating the plan
- **Communicate Expectations/Requirements to groups sharing the facility**

Drive-In Worship Requirements—Attachment B

- Determine how you will provide the service using the following questions:
 - Will your parking lot allow for a drive-in service observing distancing (6 feet or more) requirements?
 - Will it be from a stage outside and if so, where will the stage be? in the parking lot or on the edge of the parking lot?
 - If no stage is required, how will you handle audio issues safely?
 - If you are providing the service over Zoom or internet radio, how will this be conducted?
- Coordinate with local law enforcement and local emergency management and let them know you are planning to hold a Drive-In service in the parking lot. Determine if you need law enforcement and an emergency vehicle on the property and make the proper arrangements.
- Secure volunteers to direct parking and put up any signs needed. Volunteers will be asked questions about their health to ensure they are not ill.
- The church building will be locked and not accessible for members. There will be no restrooms open.
- No one should leave their vehicles for any reason while at the Drive-In Worship service. Participants (other than worship leaders) should be in the cab of their vehicles at all times. No sitting on vehicles or in the beds of trucks. No lawn chairs or blankets.
- Develop a Communication Plan. Send out the communication to your members with the service times and the rules for attendance. Post the communication on your website along with the rules for attendance. If you don't have a website, post it on whatever social media platform you use. If you have a bulletin, post it on your website or social media platform. If you use email for your members, email the bulletin.
- Everyone, including volunteers, staff, and clergy must follow physical distancing at all times. That means everyone must stay at least 6 feet away from each other.
- No playground will be open.
- No bulletins will be given out.
- Park in every other spot. There must be a spot open on the left and right of your vehicle.
- Other than dropping offering into a receptacle provided by a volunteer standing 6 feet from the vehicle, (for instance, with a bucket on a broomstick), there will not be any exchange of anything between those members and guests in their cars and the volunteers, staff, and clergy.

- Persons who are sick, should stay home.
- Plan for the enforcement of these requirements. Churches that offer drive-in worship without helping all persons abide by them face extra liability.

Strict Protocol—Attachment C

Individual Safety

- STRICT PHYSICAL DISTANCING - 6 FEET OR MORE AT ALL TIMES
- FACE COVERINGS REQUIRED
- DISPOSABLE GLOVES FOR GREETERS, USHERS, COMMUNION HELPERS, COUNTERS
- SANITIZER STATIONS AS POSSIBLE IN FACILITY, ENCOURAGE INDIVIDUALS TO BRING THEIR OWN HAND SANITIZER
- NO HANDSHAKES OR HUGGING
- NO NURSERY OR GATHERED CHILDREN'S TIME IN WORSHIP
- NO COFFEE OR FELLOWSHIP TIME
- WORSHIP ONLY
- HYMNALS, BIBLES AND ALL WORSHIP MATERIALS REMOVED
- IF THERE IS A BULLETIN IT SHOULD BE DIGITAL
- DIGITAL WORDS FOR ELEMENTS OF ORDER OF WORSHIP
- DROP-OFF OFFERING ONLY — NO PASSING PLATES
- COMMUNION (PRE-PACKAGED)**
- STRICT PHYSICAL DISTANCING IN SANCTUARY SEATING
- NO CHOIRS
- NO SINGING - INCLUDING CONGREGATION
- NO BAPTISMS
- WEDDING WITH PHYSICAL DISTANCING (6 FEET OR MORE)
- THOSE WHO ARE SICK MUST STAY AT HOME
- INTENSE CLEANING OF HIGH TOUCH AREAS (CDC GUIDELINES)
- PHYSICAL DISTANCING (6 FEET OR MORE) DURING DISMISSAL****
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Church Programming

- GATHERINGS OF NO MORE THAN 25 (STAGE 1)
- NO IN-PERSON VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL
- NO LARGE GATHERINGS INCLUDING REVIVALS AND CAMP MEETINGS
- NO LARGE OUTSIDE GATHERINGS
- CONTINUE ONLINE/CONFERENCE CALL WORSHIP FOR MOST VULNERABLE
- CHILDCARE WITH PRIORITY GIVEN FOR CHILDREN OF PARENTS WORKING AS ESSENTIAL PERSONNEL WITH PHYSICAL DISTANCING

Notes:

- **COMMUNION PRE-PACKAGED MAY BE DIFFICULT FOR ELDERLY TO OPEN
- ADDITIONAL SERVICES OR SPACES IN THE BUILDING TO ALLOW FOR PHYSICAL DISTANCING
- ***DISMISSAL ROW BY ROW HELPS WITH PHYSICAL DISTANCING

Stage 3 New Normal Protocol—Attachment D

Individual Safety

- MODERATE SAFE DISTANCING
- FACE COVERINGS (OPTIONAL)
- MAINTAIN SANITIZER STATIONS
- HANDSHAKE OR HUGGING (OPTIONAL)
- RESUME NURSERY, CHILDREN’S MINISTRY, SUNDAY SCHOOL
- COFFEE OR FELLOWSHIP TIME
- REGULAR WORSHIP
- PLATE PASSING /DROP-OFF OFFERING
- REGULAR COMMUNION
- NORMAL SANCTUARY SEATING
- CHOIRS AND CONGREGATIONAL SINGING MAY BE SEVERELY RESTRICTED BY PREVAILING GUIDELINES
- BAPTISMS
- NORMAL WEDDINGS
- SICK MUST STAY AT HOME
- CONTINUE INTENSE CLEANING
- NORMAL DISMISSAL

Church Programming

- UNLIMITED INDIVIDUALS
 - PHYSICAL DISTANCING VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL
 - NORMAL LARGE GATHERING
 - NORMAL LARGE CHURCH GATHERING
 - SUMMER CAMPS OPTIONAL
 - PRESCHOOL RESUMES (OPTIONAL)
 - CONTINUE LIVE-STREAM FOR THE CAUTIOUS
 - DRIVE-BY FOOD DISTRIBUTION PREPARED BY HEALTH DEPARTMENT APPROVED
- CHURCH KITCHEN
- BLOOD DRIVES RESUME
 - HOSTING DRIVE-THRU COVID-19 TESTING PERMITTED

Notes:

- *CONTINUE HEALTHY CHURCH TEAM