

NEW SUPPLEMENTAL GUIDANCE REGARDING PHASED REOPENING OF CHURCHES

Presbytery of Lake Huron

October 2, 2020

“Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.” – Romans 12:12

Brothers and Sisters of Lake Huron Presbytery:

As the COVID-19 pandemic has passed the six-month mark, cooler weather sets in, and churches begin their fall programs we write to you with an update on our guidance regarding church gatherings, protocols, and support. These past six months have shown the amazing resilience and creativity of our congregations and leaders as you have served with “energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.” A new season presents new challenges, and we are confident that you will continue in the same spirit.

At this point, we are seeing a resurgence of the spread of COVID across the nation. New hot spots are developing, and sad new milestones are happening. It has even reached the White House, showing that no one is completely safe. While the spread is currently more controlled within our region it is difficult to predict trends over the next few weeks and months. Flu season is also coming, with symptoms difficult at the outset to differentiate from COVID (get your flu shot!). We know this has been an exhausting episode for many, who are just tired, and wondering how to get through the next few months. We encourage you to persevere in faithfulness and patience, compassion and prayer.

New Michigan Executive Orders

On September 25, Governor Whitmer signed executive orders [2020-183](#) and [2020-184](#) relaxing some of the restrictions on public gatherings across the state of Michigan. These orders inform our guidance to you.

Order 2020-183, which takes effect on October 9, permits indoor social gatherings and organized events of **up to 20% of seating capacity** in venues with fixed seating, or **up to 20 persons per 1,000 square feet** in venues without fixed seating. So, for example, a congregation with a sanctuary that seats 250 persons would be permitted to have up to 50 persons in the sanctuary at one time. A church fellowship hall that is 40' x 60', for example, would be permitted to hold events of up to 48 people (2400/1000 x 20). For spaces smaller than 500 square feet, the previous order limiting gatherings to 10 persons still holds. Previously mandated protocols regarding social distancing, mask-wearing, disinfection, and other precautions must still be enforced. While we want to encourage churches in their outreach and evangelism, we advise that public and special events carefully adhere to the capacity limits and safety protocols.

Outdoor gatherings of more than 100 persons may be held up to 30% of fixed seating or 30 persons per 1,000 square feet of event space, with a maximum of 1,000 persons.

As before, churches are not subject to penalty for violations of these orders for services of worship, but not for other purposes.

Order 2020-184, which takes effect immediately, addresses worker safeguards and workplace protocols for offices and other settings. All workplaces must continue the regimen of providing protective equipment, health-monitoring, disinfection, signage, distancing, and mask-wearing as previously mandated. Likewise, workplaces must continue to promote remote work and to conduct meetings virtually whenever possible and shall restrict all non-essential travel.

Conducting Indoor, In-Person Worship

Those churches which either currently practice or plan to resume indoor, in-person worship are reminded of the safety protocols we have previously issued. It is especially important to limit congregational responses and to [avoid singing](#), as these vastly increase the chance of virus transmission. Many churches are using taped videos of hymns and anthems and inserting them into the service at appropriate times. Also, a shorter worship service reduces exposure time and the likelihood of transmission. Consider using an abbreviated order of worship when possible.

In addition, our friend and colleague Lisa Allgood of Cincinnati Presbytery, a career research immunologist and presbytery executive who was featured in our August webinar, has shared this advice:

As you enter the colder months, the same suggestions that have been made for air conditioning apply to heating, made even more impactful since most heating units do not have even the filters that an air conditioning unit may have: whatever system you have, heat in advance of people entering the sanctuary and turn off anything that blows air around for the time they are there. And perhaps encourage them to come prepared to keep coats and sweaters (and masks!) on at all times.

You know that there is no risk-free way to gather again in person in a building until there is a proven, tested, effective, and widely-distributed vaccine (in other words, more than 75% of people have received the vaccine) along with adequate testing for infection and antibodies and a robust contact tracing program. The greatest risk of exposure and spread happens when large groups of people gather in a building for more than 15 minutes (yes, that's all it takes). In person church worship is categorized as a "super-spreader" event. Keep on planning to evaluate incidence and continue to evaluate the viability of in-person programming and worship – again, this is not ever going to be a one-and-done decision until the vaccines have been widely received.

If you have not done so, you may wish to adopt new bylaws or rules permitting electronic, virtual annual meetings now, rather than later, when outdoor gatherings become increasingly difficult.

Presbytery Assistance

While the deadline for COVID-19 assistance grants has passed, congregations in need of financial assistance due to the pandemic may still request assistance using the same grant

forms. Likewise, technology assistance grants are still available. All requests will be reviewed by the Commission on Ministry at its monthly meeting.

Virtual Worship Resources and Issues

The amount of work needed to produce online worship can be taxing. Our General Assembly and various synods have produced sermons and whole worship services which can be used on various streaming or meeting platforms. Our own Synod of the Covenant is producing a set of Advent and Christmas worship services. Our own Presbytery will be producing the service for December 27. Links for these will be available in the Bi-weekly Brief.

There has been some concern expressed about a new Facebook policy regarding the use of copyrighted music in livestream performances. Facebook guidelines state, "Use of music for commercial or non-personal purposes in particular is prohibited unless you have obtained appropriate licenses." They recently added language prohibiting the use of Facebook videos to "create a music listening experience." This is not defined, but violations may result in blocking the video, and having your page, profile, or group deleted. This applies to both recorded and live-streamed music. We do not believe that church services will be targeted for the use of music within worship services, and we will notify you if this is the case. It does, however, probably preclude music-only events such as hymn-sings, cantatas, and the like.

Presbytery Gatherings

Meetings of the Presbytery and its committees will continue to be held electronically until further notice, in keeping with the state mandates. The staff will continue to work remotely as much as possible. Staff travel will be restricted to essential business only, and then only when all in-person gathering protocols are being observed.

"God did not give us a spirit that makes us afraid but a spirit of power and love and self-control." – 2 Timothy 1:7 (NCV)

Finally, we encourage you to adjust your policies and plans according to changes in the incidence of COVID-19 in your area. You may find continuously updated county-by-county reports at www.covidactnow.org. You have shown amazing faithfulness, creativity, and perseverance through these past six months. May God bless you with God's spirit of "power and love and self-control" that you might continue to act faithfully in the days ahead.

Your Servants in Christ,

The Presbytery Council