



Public Worship and Public Health, May 12, 2020

We have had many conversations about the coronavirus pandemic and when to start meeting again in person for worship. Now, both Idaho and Oregon have active plans for when and how businesses and churches may open up to the public. In this letter, you will find information about the state plans, our national and global context, and things to think about when considering when to worship in our regular places again.

State plans: The governors of Idaho and Oregon have announced guidelines for a gradual lifting of the stay at home orders.

The Idaho plan can be found at this Internet link:

<https://rebound.idaho.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/opening-up-guidelines.pdf>

“Places of worship can reopen if they adhere to strict social distancing, sanitation protocol, and any CDC guidance.” (As of May 1 in Idaho)

CDC guidance from March (this varies according to the amount of Covid-19 spread in your area): https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/guidance-community-faith-organizations.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fcommunity%2Fguidance-community-faith-organizations.html

Idaho started its Phase 1 reopening on May 1. Some Idaho churches have resumed meeting for worship in their usual places.

The Oregon plan is at this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IzSz5tb5SMw&feature=youtu.be>

“Religious organizations could gather as many as 25 people if they maintain physical distancing,” state epidemiologist Dean Sidelinger said, but only if the county they’re in meets criteria for reopening.

Oregon will start Phase 1 for some counties on May 15. Each Oregon county must gain approval of its plan from the state before starting Phase 1. All counties except in the Portland metro area and Lincoln county have applied. The Governor’s office says that as a rule, rural counties will open sooner than counties with higher populations.

National and Global Context: Covid-19 is the worst public health crisis for the United States in a century. To date, at least 80,000 people have died of the Covid-19 virus in the

U.S. this spring. The US has about one quarter of all the known cases in the world, though this depends upon how many tests are done.

The US has no comprehensive response to the pandemic, so standards vary by state and often within states. There is not yet a vaccine, while adequate supplies, testing and contact tracing have been very spotty. So far, social distancing has been the most effective way to prevent community spread.

Public health experts generally agree that many states are not ready to reopen, based upon goals for decreasing numbers of new cases, hospitalizations and deaths. About one third of all US Covid-19 deaths have been in nursing homes. A disproportionate number of US deaths have been among persons of color. With different areas affected at different rates of transmission, the sense of urgency varies. Unlike with 9/11, the social divisions in the US have surfaced very clearly.

More Resources

- This link gives **information by county** in the US: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/us-map>. You can enter your state and county to find the number of cases and deaths. A few counties in our region have zero or very few deaths, but few have been totally spared.
- Another link for information by **entering your zip code**:
<https://www.cnn.com/resources/coronavirus-information>
- This link shows the current statistics for **confirmed cases and deaths in each state**.
<https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2020/health/coronavirus-us-maps-and-cases/>
- You can scroll down and enter your state to look at **your state's "curve."**
<https://time.com/5814139/coronavirus-state-data-tracker/>

Global Context

Compared to other countries with major outbreaks, the US curve is not coming down as much:
<https://time.com/5809038/coronavirus-flatten-curve/>
The United States has one million more confirmed cases of coronavirus than any other nation.

See here for Disciples ministry with partners around the world:
https://www.globalministries.org/covid_19_area_exec_report

When to reopen the church?

The sad truth is that the threat of Covid-19 will remain with us for the foreseeable future. While we don't like staying apart, we are helping ourselves and others in an important way. If you or your area has not been infected, your chances of getting infected have been lower because of social distancing, staying home, wearing masks and reducing travel.

If you or your loved ones have not been infected, that does not mean you are immune to Covid-19. As more businesses and churches open up, as people from higher infection areas start to travel more, out of state, to the mountains and the coast to camp, fish and hunt, we also become more open to the virus. Likewise, until we have better resources for testing, contact tracing, and a vaccine, increased church activity will in many areas increase the chance of community spread.

For this reason, we recommend in general that our churches wait longer before meeting together.

If your church has a strong interest in opening soon, please consult with your county health officials, plus the state and CDC plans. As your state or county reopens, a wise course for the church would be to watch and to pray, and to see what happens as other congregations resume worship in your area. Also, watch first to see what happens nationwide as many states become more active. Since most of our congregations in the region have a high percentage of individuals considered to be at higher risk, continued caution is advised.

Whenever your congregation might reopen, you can begin working on a plan now

- How would you do your cleaning safely and effectively? Can you get enough supplies?
- What will be your seating plan?
- What to do about worship bulletins, offering trays, serving communion, and distancing within the church (or outside if weather permits)?
- Will you ask people to wear masks, and will you provide them?
- You will need a detailed safety plan to reopen your church and a communication plan.

More Resources on Reopening

<https://centerforfaithandgiving.org/2020/03/stewardship-in-a-time-of-crisis-best-practices-for-the-invitation-to-the-offering-in-a-streaming-environment/>

<https://www.insuranceboard.org/covid-19-resources/>

<https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/>

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