



Public Worship and Public Health, July 3, 2020

Dear Idaho and Oregon Disciples,

As we enter this holiday weekend, our annual concerns for safety and good judgment have become larger. Following the Memorial Day weekend, Covid-19 infections increased nationally, in Idaho and in Oregon. Many public health officials now say that the U.S. has “reopened” too soon, with too little caution. We give thanks for the careful approaches taken by Disciples of Christ in Oregon and SW Idaho.

In this message, we will share some of the approaches taken by congregations, recent local decisions about masks and gatherings, and information resources about the coronavirus in your area.

Different approaches to summer worship by Disciples congregations in Oregon & SW Idaho region:

- Continued online only worship: pre-recorded and/or live with one congregation.
- Online worship shared occasionally or weekly with other congregations
- Outdoor worship with distancing, limited worship and masks.
- Indoor with limited numbers, pre-registration in some cases, physical distancing and masks generally required (see note below). Keep track of participants for contact tracing.
- Indoor worship with limited numbers, physical distancing and masks optional
- Decision making scheduled for mid July
- In person worship for a time, changing back to online only after increased spread of virus in the community
- Cancellation of worship at least for the summer

You can see different approaches for different areas. As the church makes careful decisions, conditions can also change about the local rate of infection and increased or decreased government requirements.

Government Requirements:

Most of Idaho is in Stage 4 of the state reopening plan. This places much of the authority into health districts covering several counties each across the state. The Central Health District has returned Ada County (Boise area) to Stage 3, with bars and nightclubs closed. **Facial coverings are required in most indoor and outdoor public places in Boise and recommended in most of Idaho.** Some exceptions apply. Gatherings of any size are allowed in Stage 4 and up to 50 people in Stage 3.

All **Oregon** counties are in Phase 2, except Multnomah, Washington, Clackamas and Lincoln, which are in Stage 1. **Oregon now requires facial coverings in all indoor public places, again with a few exemptions. “Indoor public places” includes houses of worship.** Whether required or not, masks or other facial coverings will reduce the spread of the coronavirus. **Exemptions are allowed for legitimate medical reasons. Plan to make reasonable accommodation for persons who claim a medical exemption. The Oregon Health Authority recommends against asking for proof or disclosure of the reason for the medical exemption.** Please note that some face coverings such as bandanas are looser than others. **Plan to have masks and alternative face coverings available in worshipping indoors.**

Other Factors:

Legal Challenges to Limits on Church Gatherings: Church Law and Tax Report has reviewed about forty court cases nationwide challenging the government’s authority to restrict worship gatherings. Most including the Oregon challenge have not had success. Chief Justice John Roberts has issued an opinion that local governments have authority regarding public health, an authority than can extend to churches along with other gatherings.

Churches Behaving Badly: You may have seen examples in the news of churches ignoring virus prevention guidelines. A megachurch in Texas held a political event with a 100 voice choir (singing is thought to cause additional risk of spreading droplets). The pastor of a megachurch in Arizona hosted a political gathering of more than 2,000 people, claiming that the air system would eliminate 99% of the risk. The manufacturer said that the pastor misunderstood the capability of the system. [Also note that IRS regulations prohibit churches from assisting political campaigns] In Eastern Oregon, a church in Island City continued to worship as usual and caused a major outbreak in Union County, which had few previous infections.

Scroll down further: to find links to local and national information about coronavirus spread and regulations. Nationally and closer to home, decreased safety measures have led to increased infections and deaths. In Idaho and Oregon, the majority of deaths have been among seniors and many of our congregations have a high percentage of seniors. In the weeks and months ahead, your congregation will need to continually watch the infection rates in your area, changing the plan when necessary. Some of our congregations have plans with their own stages of reopening that can move forward or back on the chart as needed. Unfortunately, the U.S. has many months to go, at best, before virus prevention measures will be unnecessary. Thank you again to you and your congregation for the care you are showing for each other, the community and the nation.

Independence Day:

The Fourth of July in 2020 gives us the opportunity to think about the relationship between freedom and responsibility. Freedom is not only “freedom from” authority, it is also “freedom to” pursue the common good. With the coronavirus, personal responsibility is needed for the common good and for individuals to enjoy “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” In recent weeks, the nation has also given more attention to the destructive effects of racism, which undermines these same values of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” The need for personal responsibility in confronting racism remains as our calling. Jesus lived a life of healing and compassion.

[See the iceberg illustration from our regional church website:

https://2bbd6caf-70b5-45cf-bc86c33ddcf5e00a.filesusr.com/ugd/0cb219_cada30be865644588fce5f6f1e82b410.pdf]

As Jesus’ followers, we seek to love our neighbors as ourselves. From prison, Paul wrote in Philippians 2: “*Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.....for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God’s good pleasure.*” Blessings on your weekend and your summer,

Doug and Cathy Myers Wirt

Regional Ministers

Nationally, by state and by county:

<https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2020/health/coronavirus-us-maps-and-cases/>

Idaho statewide statistics:

https://public.tableau.com/profile/idaho.division.of.public.health#!/vizhome/DPHIdahoCOVID-19Dashboard_V2/Story1

Idaho Stage 4 Guidelines: Masks recommended indoors,

<https://rebound.idaho.gov/stage-4-stay-healthy-guidelines/>

<https://www.cityofboise.org/departments/mayor/coronavirus-covid-19-information/#orders>

<https://www.boisestatepublicradio.org/post/heres-what-we-know-about-6000-confirmed-cases-coronavirus-idaho#stream/0>

Oregon

<https://public.tableau.com/profile/oregon.health.authority.covid.19#!/vizhome/OregonCOVID-19PublicHealthIndicators/COVID-19Burden>

<https://www.oregon.gov/newsroom/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?newsid=36869>

<https://sharesystems.dhsoha.state.or.us/DHSForms/Served/1e2390e.pdf>

Q4: Who should not wear a face covering? • Children 2 years old and younger. • Because children between 2 and 12 years old can have trouble wearing a face covering properly (e.g. not touching the face covering, changing the face covering if visibly soiled, risk of problems breathing, etc.) we urge that coverings be worn by children over 2 years old only when an adult can help and is closely watching. Face coverings should never be worn by children when sleeping. • Anyone with a disability that prevents the individual from wearing a face covering. • Anyone who is deaf or hard of hearing and moves their face and mouth to communicate. • Anyone who has a medical condition that makes it hard to breathe when wearing a face covering. • Anyone who has trouble breathing, is unconscious, or unable to remove the face covering without help.

<https://govstatus.egov.com/reopening-oregon#countyStatuses>

<https://govstatus.egov.com/OR-OHA-COVID-19>

<https://sharesystems.dhsoha.state.or.us/DHSForms/Served/1e2288K.pdf>

Statewide Mask, Face Shield, Face Covering Guidance Applicability: This guidance applies statewide to: • All businesses, as defined below, and to the general public when visiting these businesses. • The general public when visiting indoor spaces open to the public.

“Indoor spaces open to the public” include indoor spaces, whether publicly owned or privately owned, where the public has access by right or invitation, express or implied, whether by payment of money or not. In addition to the public areas of the businesses defined above, such spaces may include, but are not limited to, building lobbies or common spaces, elevators, bathrooms, and buildings or meeting rooms outside of private homes where people gather for social, civic, cultural or religious purposes.”