



# **PRINCIPLES AND DIRECTIONS FOR THE REOPENING OF UMC FACILITIES IN MICHIGAN**



**Michigan Conference**  
The United Methodist Church

MAY 2020

# INTRODUCTION

To slow the spread of the deadly coronavirus COVID-19 virus, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer has released a series of emergency orders, the most recent, Executive Order No. 2020-70. Portions of that order recommend all churches suspend in person gatherings and close church buildings until May 28, 2020. Based on these orders, Bishop Bard requested that United Methodist local churches not hold in person worship services until at least May 28, 2020.

It is expected at some point, restrictions may be eased or lifted in the coming weeks and months. This publication is intended to provide guidance on how to reopen safely, based on state health recommendations. The publication is produced in consultation with Conference Staff, Michigan Public Health Advisors and based on recommendations provided by Federal and state public health officials. It reflects the best-known recommendations as of May 7, 2020. This document will be updated online as information becomes available at [MichiganUMC.org/health-crisis-risk-management](https://MichiganUMC.org/health-crisis-risk-management). Before taking any action, you are advised to consult the conference website for the latest advisories and recommendations.

## **A. CURRENT GUIDING PRINCIPLES:**

- Online worship has greatly improved in recent weeks and is still improving; pastors, worship leaders, musicians and persons in the pew are developing much greater tech awareness and ability; creativity is abounding; the same is the case for church small group and administrative meetings;
- District and Conference staff are working remotely with maximum effectiveness;
- Like it or not, we are entering a new era in the operation of worship and church – there will be no going back and these new understandings should be embraced;
- There is still a strong need to have in person worship, small groups, outreach ministries and administrative work;
- The safety of our church participants is top priority, especially with rapidly improving technological abilities everywhere; all decisions should err on the side of safety;
- It is conceivable that over the next two years we will face varying degrees of shelter in place and public gathering standards, perhaps even going back and forth depending on conditions and locations;
- For the safety of all of society, we will follow the guidelines of the Governor of the State of Michigan with respect to shelter in place and public gatherings, and not feel a need to resist for political, faith or first amendment reasons;
- The Governor sets the minimum standards for safety – United Methodist congregations and District and Conference offices may choose higher standards of safety for themselves;
- Congregations should continually check with their County Public Health Departments for local conditions that will assist them in making safety decisions;
- All appointments are still being made as of July 1st and all moves are still expected to take place at the end of June.

## **B. SAFETY STANDARDS FOR ALL REOPENING POSSIBILITIES:**

- Congregations should engage in an assessment of their risk level based on the following questions and factors:
  - What percentage of church attendees are over the age of 60?
  - What is your average attendance at each worship service?
  - How many people does your sanctuary hold?
  - What is your capability with respect to cleaning and sanitation of your facility?
  - What section of the State of Michigan do you live in?
  - What has your local county reported as the county's infection rate?
  - What is the number of daily new virus cases in your county?
  - Are new cases trending upward, at a plateau, declining gradually, or declining at a rapid rate?
  - What is the danger of a spike if things are more relaxed and there is more travel around Michigan?

- Based on the answers to these questions, assess the level of risk of your congregation related to the start-up of worship and other church activities;
  - High Risk;
  - Moderate Risk;
  - Low Risk;
- Congregations of all three risk levels should make provision for continual good cleaning of the facility;
  - Cleaning and sanitizing should be commenced well before a space is used, especially a worship space; all spaces should also be cleaned and sanitized immediately before and immediately after the space is used;
  - Personnel who do cleaning, whether volunteer or professional, should be trained in proper use of cleaning techniques, products and personal safety;
  - If you are unable to procure the proper cleaning and sanitation products, the facility should remain closed;
  - Always having adequate soap and paper toweling in the bathrooms and hand sanitizers in more public areas; the facility should remain closed if these items cannot be procured;
  - The use of cleaning solutions without fragrances is strongly recommended;
  - Congregations should have written procedures for cleaning and sanitizing spaces that are publicly available and always followed;
- In all cases good personal hygiene needs to be practiced, attention to physical distancing is critical;
- In all cases people who are feeling ill or running a fever should not gather with others;
- The use of masks should be mandatory for all high risk and moderate risk congregations and no one should enter the facility without one; congregations should consider having extra cloth masks available at the doors, and consider having the ability to collect and wash its own set of masks; low risk congregations are strongly encouraged to use masks at all times;
- Special Safety Note: There is evidence that singing aerosolizes respiratory droplets and viral particles, making all singing, and especially group singing, a super-spreader, just like sneezing and coughing;

## **C. PHASE I - THE INITIAL RELAXING OF RESTRICTIONS (SMALLER GROUPS ALLOWED)**

- Worship leaders may gather again to tape worship or live stream from the sanctuary; high risk congregations should recommence this more slowly and cautiously;
- Congregations in moderate and low risk categories may consider parking lot worship services; if you wish to hold such services the following questions and guidelines should be considered:
  - Will this service encourage persons at high-risk to leave home rather than stay more safely at home?
  - Each household should be in a separate vehicle;
  - If windows are to be rolled down, cars should keep the six feet distance;
  - High risk congregations should not hold parking lot services;

- Moderate and low risk congregations may have small groups and committees meet again at the church, in the discretion of both the Pastor and Church Council;
- Children’s ministries should not recommence at all during this time; please see Addendum A entitled “Considerations for the Reopening of Children’s Ministries;”
- In person pastoral care may resume as appropriate and with attention to hygiene and the wellness of both Pastor and parishioner;
- In person outreach ministries, such as food banks, may reopen in the discretion of both the Pastor and Church Council provided all safety guidelines are met;
- In person outreach and fellowship ministries which include food preparation and meals in the facility should not be re-commenced at this time;
- Church offices in moderate and low risk congregations may reopen with limited use and access in the discretion of both the Pastor and the Church Council;
- District and Conference offices may reopen in the discretion of the DS/Director in charge;

## **D. PHASE II - AS RESTRICTIONS ARE RELAXED EVEN MORE (LARGER GROUPS ALLOWED)**

- Church buildings may reopen for in person worship and other gatherings in the discretion of the both the Pastor and Church Council;
  - Online worship opportunities should continue indefinitely even upon resumption of some in person worship opportunities;
  - Pastors and the Church Council will need to carefully determine and implement the use of both in person worship and online worship opportunities to best reach their parishioners and constituents;
  - High risk congregations will want to take extra precautions and operate at even higher standards of cleanliness and distancing;
  - Pastors and the Church Council of congregations that are at high and moderate risk may need to make significant adjustments based on the size of their worship spaces and the anticipated regular attendance; some congregations, especially those with larger worship attendance, which may exceed the Governor’s drawing lines, may need to have additional worship services or come up with mechanisms to divide their congregations for attendance at different times;
- High risk individuals – over age 60 and/or with underlying conditions – should continue to shelter in place and worship online;
- High risk congregations should consider screening for symptoms and travel, and temperature checks;
- Eliminate all physical contact, including the passing of the peace in worship – have people offer a simple bow to others;
- Maintain distancing by keeping every other pew open, with distancing within each pew being used; worship times and attendees may need to be managed to accomplish this;

- Those in a household who are living together may sit in a pew together without distancing;
- High and moderate risk congregations should ban all singing, including choir rehearsals, choir participation in worship, solos in worship and congregational singing;
- Low risk congregations may consider singing only with masks in place;
- Options for Holy Communion:
  - High risk congregations should not serve Holy Communion;
  - The best option for Holy Communion for moderate and low risk congregations would be to have individual pre-packaged communion elements;
  - The second best option would be to have individual trays of cups and individual portions of bread available at the front of the sanctuary and served by a minimum number of servers, not allowing partakers to reach for and secure their own elements;
  - Passing elements in the pews should not occur;
  - If served by intinction, use the least number of servers possible, perhaps only the Pastor, who sanitizes her/his hands immediately prior to distribution, and who also wears a mask, and who alone touches the elements;
  - The preparers of the elements prior to the worship service must follow rigorous sanitation practices;
- The continuing development of online and auto-pay giving is strongly encouraged; for the Sunday offering do not pass offering plates – have them available in the sanctuary or have drop boxes in the hallways or at the church office;
- Pencils, envelopes, and welcome pads should be removed from the pews; Bibles and Hymnals should also be removed from the pews when visual technology is available or in high risk congregations;
- Only use worship bulletins if visual technology is not available in the sanctuary; using digital bulletins through online posting or emailing would be appropriate;
- There should be no greeting line following worship;
- On initial reopening, there should be no Sunday School classes of any kind, including nursery or children's church;
- On initial reopening, there should be no greeters, fellowship time or welcome desk;
- Begin Sunday School, fellowship time, greeters and welcome desk at a later date based on safety in the discretion of both the Pastor and Church Council after studying and applying "Considerations for Reopening Children's Ministries" attached as Addendum A;
- More frequent pastoral phone calls to staff and congregation are encouraged;
- Congregations should organize their care ministries for the long term to reach out to their most vulnerable and isolated parishioners;
- Congregations will need to have honest integrity in the keeping of online and in person worship attendance statistics for ultimate submission to the UMC; more guidance is available from GCFA;
- Continue to build on video outreach capacities; consider mid-week video devotions and Bible Studies; continue to develop online presence for small group meetings and administrative meetings;

- For moderate and low risk congregations, in person outreach and fellowship ministries which involve food preparation and meals in the facility may re-commence in the discretion of both the Pastor and the Church Council;
- Carefully analyze your community outreach ministries to determine how they can be adjusted, enhanced, or eliminated if necessary.

## E. RESOURCES

- **World Health Organization**

<https://www.who.int/publications-detail/practical-considerations-and-recommendations-for-religious-leaders-and-faith-based-communities-in-the-context-of-covid-19>

- **Center for Disease Control and Prevention**

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/checklist.html>

- **Questions congregations should ask before reopening:**

<https://kenbraddy.com/2020/04/18/20-questions-your-church-should-answer-before-people-return/>

- **Michigan Conference's First Sunday Back**

<https://michiganumc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/First-Sunday-Back.pdf>

- **Wisconsin Council of Churches**

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



# Addendum A

## Considerations for Reopening Children's Ministry in Michigan

This Addendum is provided as a resource to supplement the Reopening Standards of the Michigan Conference to specifically address reopening children's ministries in Michigan Conference congregation.

As you consider reopening children's ministries, remember your "why" and "how" and start with your guiding principles/values as you plan your next steps and as you review and implement your Protection Policy/Safe Sanctuaries Policy.

This is a good time to review your sick policy, cleaning procedures, and other safety policies and procedures (the CDC has recommendations, see link in resources).

The information in this resource is not meant to create fear or anxiety. It is information to help inform your decisions about when and how to reopen children's ministry and provide considerations for including children in worship when restrictions are lifted. The way to approach and interact with children is very important. They may not understand all the "rules" and taking a positive approach to our responses to children is important. For example, if a child runs into the room and starts hugging everyone, guide that child to their area and calmly remind him/her that we want to make sure everyone is safe and healthy and the way we help is staying in our area; as opposed to yelling or raising our voice and yelling "you can't hug anyone!" and thereby raising the anxiety of everyone. Being a non-anxious presence is going to be very important during the reopening phase.

### GETTING STARTED

This resource is designed to get you started. If you aren't sure where to start, consider these questions:

- Do you have a COVID-19 response team that is making a plan?
- Have you consulted with medical professionals in your congregation or community?
- Do you have a plan if your community experiences an outbreak?
- Do you have a clear communication plan for reopening or contingencies?
- Have you consulted with your insurance company?



- Policies and Procedures
  - Well Child Policy (written and prominently displayed)
  - Cleaning and sanitizing policy
  - Safe Sanctuaries/Protection Policy
- If the use of masks is mandated or strongly recommended, will you be able to provide child size masks?

## **WORSHIP**

- Nursery:
  - Physical distancing in the nursery is nearly impossible. It is recommended that infants and toddlers who are in diapers remain with their parents/caregivers.
  - Offer a place for parents/caregivers to change diapers. Ensure proper cleaning and sanitizing supplies are readily available.
  - If the changing area is in the nursery, put away all toys so they are inaccessible.
  - If you offer a children's time during worship, how will you handle this with physical distancing? Consider asking children to stay in their seats while offering a time that is focused on children.
  - If worship includes all ages, be mindful of ways to keep different ages engaged.
  - If you have worship bags (busy bags, etc.), will you offer take home bags each week or how will you be able to sanitize them each week.
  - If you offer a playground or grace space, how will you sanitize it? This may be an appropriate time to put it away until physical distancing is lifted. Or consider offering small boxes of toys that can be cleaned and sanitized after each service. (Make sure this is included in your updated cleaning and sanitizing procedures.)
  - All items in the pews should be taken out, including pew cards, pencils, hymnals, Bibles. If these items remain in the pew, how will they be properly sanitized following each service?
  - In churches where children serve as acolytes, make sure you can follow all guidelines for physical distancing and cleaning. You may consider, when first reopening, to have worship leaders light the candles to minimize contact and risk.

## **SUNDAY SCHOOL/CHILDREN'S CHURCH**

- Before reopening Sunday School/Children's Church make sure that you can consistently follow the guidelines from local and national officials, have appropriate policies and procedures in place, have trained volunteers appropriately on new procedures, and communicated with families any changes or updates.
- Will you offer toddler or preschool classrooms?
- Will you offer elementary age classrooms?
- What measures have you taken to maintain physical distancing, cleaning and sanitizing, and other necessary measures as recommended?
- Some experts have advised against singing. Consider how you will shape your time and if you will include singing.
- Eating snacks of any kind should be discouraged as children will touch their face.
- Other considerations:
  - Do you have the necessary supplies (cleaning spray and wipes, hand sanitizer, hand soap, gloves, face masks, etc.) to reopen?
  - Have you contacted each volunteer, communicated all changes, and asked if he/she would like to continue leading? (This is very important as leaders may be in vulnerable populations or have underlying health conditions. Do no harm includes not pressuring volunteers to come back before they are ready.)

- Face masks (for children older than 2)
- If the recommendation is to take temperatures when children arrive, do you have appropriate thermometers? And a policy/procedure for use and cleaning?
- If a child becomes sick, what is your policy for caring for that child until a parent arrives?
- Supplies and handouts - will each child have their own box or bag with crayons, markers, scissors, pencils, etc. that they will use from week to week? As long as physical distancing has to be maintained, shared supplies is not an option.
- As long as physical distancing must be maintained, shared toys should not be an option. This means that children (especially preschoolers) will only be allowed to play with toys that they are provided at the beginning of their class. For example, each child may have their own chair/spot on the floor where they may sit with a box/bag of supplies and toys. Toys cannot be shared with other children. There may not be snacks (as it means children will be touching their face). Children must be able to follow directions and stay in their areas.
- Restrooms - best practices from Safe Sanctuaries/Protection Policy should be followed while maintaining physical distancing (is applicable). Ensure that children wash their hands well before returning to the classroom. Whenever possible, having restrooms dedicated to children is best.
- One of the difficulties of reopening children's ministries while physical distancing remains in effect is how to care for children who cannot or will not follow directions and expectations for physical distancing. What will your policy be for children who do not listen and need to be returned to parents? How will you provide pastoral care for that child and family? Is it better to postpone reopening until everyone can participate? Whatever your policy, have it in writing and provide it to all parents/caregivers.

## **OTHER CHILDREN'S MINISTRIES**

- Consider postponing or canceling all in person children's ministries for the remainder of the school year. Many churches follow the school for canceling programs and while these days off are not weather related, it may be a helpful standard for church ministries.

## **SUMMER/VBS**

- Understand your why and evaluate how your summer ministries are in alignment.
- Will you keep VBS at its scheduled time? Postpone? Cancel? Re-vision? Go Digital?
- Discuss summer ministry plans with church leadership. It is important to take into account local and state recommendations. It may also be helpful to find out what other organizations in your community are doing with children's programming this summer.
- You may want to ask families and volunteers about their thoughts about holding an in person or online VBS.
- Communicate with your families and volunteers.
- Consider online learning and "Zoom" fatigue if pivoting to other options.
- If you decide to cancel and restrictions are loosened, consider a creative way to gather families for a summer celebration. Perhaps a block party or one-day VBS. Be creative!
- Be gentle with yourselves. There are many layers to these decisions. While VBS and summer programs may be a fantastic way to do community outreach, making wise decisions about what to do and when may be important ways to care for your community too.
- Consider how you may have a combination of online, blended, and in person children's ministry.

## **INTERGENERATIONAL (WHEN IN PERSON MINISTRY IS APPROPRIATE)**

- Instead of age divided Sunday School, consider family groups (family = persons who live in the same household, not necessarily biological) where each family sits together at their own table and participates together. Each family would have their own supplies for the activity and could interact together.

## **CHILDREN'S MINISTRY ONLINE:**

- Focus on relationship over content.
- Plan online meet-ups to connect with families.
- Keep online times short.
- Make online faith formation experiential and interactive (for more ideas about this visit: <https://mailchi.mp/fabd272b507b/wkgorc8s2s>)
- Take time to evaluate - what is going well that you would like to continue doing? What do you miss about in person ministry? Are there values from in person ministry that can carry over into online ministry?

## **ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS:**

- Protocols for staff and volunteers:
- What plans will you have in place if you gather people and one of those present is diagnosed with COVID-19? How would you communicate with participants that they have been exposed to the virus? How will you offer pastoral care? How will you work with health officials in the response?
- Communicating with families is important. How will you communicate your next steps and state clearly that staying home is still an appropriate and faithful decision?
- Survey families and volunteers about needs and level of comfort in returning to gather in person.
- Hybrid options – digital and gathered; being cognizant of families who aren't ready or able to return.
- Revisit your Safe Sanctuaries/Protection Policy to make sure it lays out clear online ministry policies. Online gatherings best practices can be found here: [https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/safe-sanctuaries-supporting-a-shift-to-online-youth-ministry-meetings\\_](https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/safe-sanctuaries-supporting-a-shift-to-online-youth-ministry-meetings_)

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

- 6 Considerations for Reopening your Kids Ministry - <https://kidsministry.lifeway.com/2020/04/27/6-considerations-for-reopening-your-kids-ministry/>
- Four things you need to begin planning for reopening from Christine V. Hides - [https://christinevhides.com/2020/04/26/four-things-you-need-to-begin-planning-for-reopening/?fbclid=IwAR3A5IgrcVviyJFLVIOllvZ6tV2ZSH48VjCbTZ5Ze5SH1g0iF\\_0k7vP33OE](https://christinevhides.com/2020/04/26/four-things-you-need-to-begin-planning-for-reopening/?fbclid=IwAR3A5IgrcVviyJFLVIOllvZ6tV2ZSH48VjCbTZ5Ze5SH1g0iF_0k7vP33OE)
- Ten Steps for Reopening Children's Ministry - <https://theconfidentkidmin.com/ten-steps-for-reopening-childrens-ministry/>
- Reopening Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfecting from the CDC - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/reopen-guidance.html>
- WHO - decision tree for risk management for large gatherings: [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/who-2019-ncov-mg-decision-tree-religious.pdf?sfvrsn=f3433c0a\\_2&download=true](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/who-2019-ncov-mg-decision-tree-religious.pdf?sfvrsn=f3433c0a_2&download=true)

### **Special thanks for collaboration to:**

Rev. Tanya Campen, Intergenerational Discipleship Rio Texas Conference of the UMC  
Rev. Christine V. Hides, Director of Christian Education at Kenilworth Union Church

### **If you have questions or need guidance for your church contact:**

Rev. Kathy Pittenger, Children's Initiatives Coordinator, Michigan Conference UMC  
[kpittenger@michiganumc.org](mailto:kpittenger@michiganumc.org)  
517-897-4483



## **Michigan Conference**

The United Methodist Church

The Michigan Conference  
1011 Northcrest Road  
Lansing MI 48906  
517-347-4030  
[www.MichiganUMC.org](http://www.MichiganUMC.org)