

First Presbyterian Church Franklin
Session task force on reopening
Pandemic Reopening Guideline
Version: August 18, 2020

Intended audience for this guideline

First Presbyterian Church, Franklin congregation and staff

Guiding principles:

The Apostles Creed, The Lord's Prayer

Resources used for this guideline:

1. Wisconsin Council of Churches "Returning to Church" guidelines (*Wisconsin Guideline*)
2. Nashville *Task Force* guidelines: <https://www.asafenashville.org/roadmap-for-reopening-nashville/>
3. Tennessee Department of Health data and data workbook created by Chuck Cairatti to track statistics
4. Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center. Data are provided for county-level COVID-19 disease rates: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html> > U.S. Map > States > Counties
5. Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy (CIDRAP): <https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/covid-19>
 1. Dr. Osterholm's CIDRAP podcasts are an excellent source of covid information.
6. Resolve to Save Lives Prevent Epidemics: <https://preventepidemics.org/>
7. Harvard Global Health Institute, Key metrics for COVID suppression: <https://globalhealth.harvard.edu/key-metrics-for-covid-suppression-researchers-and-public-health-experts-unite-to-bring-clarity-to-key-metrics-guiding-coronavirus-response/>

Definitions:

1. **SARS-CoV-2:** The virus that causes coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)
2. **Most vulnerable congregants:** Those age 65+ or having chronic conditions such as heart or lung disease, diabetes, or immune compromise
3. **Safety protocol:** Face masks for all ≥ 2 years of age, physical distancing, frequent hand hygiene with sanitizer, surfaces sanitized before and after use

Background

SARS-CoV-2 is the virus causing the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and the pandemic. It is highly contagious, mostly by airborne transmission from an infected individual before that individual develops symptoms. A Session committee has met regularly to develop guidelines to reopen our church activities in phases that emphasize the safety of our church family, in particular our **most vulnerable congregants**. These guidelines are informed by national-, state-, and county-specific data from Johns Hopkins (<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data>) and recommendations from the Tennessee Department of Health and the other expert resources above. Our goal is to carefully reopen to prevent a new wave of infections and deaths that would cause us to lose progress towards full reopening.

Our ability to predict what will happen during this pandemic is limited, and the following is based on our faith that God will guide us through this challenging time and on the ability that God has given us to lead our community of faith as best we can. We all want to return to our worship and other activities in the life of our church as quickly as possible. Indeed, we are confident the pandemic will come to an end and we will return to full church activities, though we must be careful in our journey through reopening. And trust us, we *will* make mistakes.

Our decisions for reopening of worship service and other church activities must be based on data, not dates. Based on the recommendations of experts in the resources listed above, we anticipate that the **following criteria will guide us in making the decisions to move between the phases of reopening**, while emphasizing that these criteria may need to be revised:

1. 14-day average new daily cases in our region < 5 per 100,000 population;
2. At least 14 days of decreasing new cases; and
3. ICU and hospital bed capacity each at $\geq 20\%$ (available for Davidson County at resource #2).

Criterion #1 is based on information from resources # 5 and 7. The following may provide perspective on this criterion:

- The rate (or *incidence*) of infection is standardized as cases per 100,000 population per day.
- In the U.S. population of ≈ 330 million, for every 10,000 new daily cases, the standardized rate = $3/100,000$
- Around Memorial Day, when many individuals ceased to shelter at home, there were $\approx 25,000$ new cases/day or $\approx 7.5/100,000$ population
- At current U.S. rate of $\approx 50,000$ /day, the standardized daily rate is $\approx 15/100,000$. However, in Williamson and adjacent counties it is $>20/100,000$

Unfortunately, the current standardized infection rate of approximately $>20/100,000$ greatly exceeds the daily rate of $<5/100,000$ in criterion 1 above. As such, we do not anticipate returning to worship in the sanctuary before January 2021.

The task force will convene weekly and as needed and will make decisions to advance through reopening phases after careful and prayerful consideration of these criteria and the recommendations of public health experts. The task force will make any decision to advance at least 5-days prior to the advance date and will notify Session immediately of this decision in order to provide each Session member sufficient opportunity to call a Session meeting for deliberation. The task force may move backward through phases immediately should circumstances warrant (e.g., a meaningful increase in community SARS-CoV-2 cases) and will immediately inform Session and the congregation.

Currently, it is best to continue our “**Safer at home**” practice, particularly to protect our *most vulnerable congregants* who are at high-risk of COVID-19 complications. However, please remember that COVID-19 is a potentially serious disease for everyone, including children and young adults.

The virus may mutate and change, and the pandemic may thus “evolve” over the coming months. As a result, we anticipate our lives to be shaped by the timeline set by the coronavirus. We face difficult choices between conflicting needs and imperatives. But we must avoid framing our situation in terms of a false choice between reviving the economy -- or our church -- and saving lives. If we don’t continue our efforts to contain the virus, a new wave of infections and deaths will cause further damage, and we will lose what we’ve gained from the measures we’ve already taken. And if we reopen our buildings and resume gatherings prematurely, we may unfairly force on our *most vulnerable congregants* the choice between keeping themselves and others safe and participating in congregational life like everyone else.

It is important that we make difficult decisions not only for our church members but also because our church serves a leadership role in our community. We are likely to move back and forth between phases as the pandemic continues, as we learn more about the virus, and as treatments and/or a vaccine become available. We don’t want to squander the gains we have made and risk overwhelming our health care system in a way that impacts patients with COVID-19 disease as happened in New York City.

We pray for a spirit of discernment, for wisdom, and patience. We pray for all people around the world who are waiting for the Lord, who are looking for signs of God’s presence in the midst of this pandemic, and who are acting in their waiting with love for God and neighbor. With great hope for all the ways God is creating our future, we offer these guidelines for the people of First Presbyterian Church.

Our Model for Returning to Church Activities:

Foremost, we ask God to give us wisdom and guidance in our decision-making. The following model is derived from the resources above. These guidelines are, overall, in harmony over how we may safely and expeditiously return to sharing worship. Emphasis is on protecting our *most vulnerable congregants*. In addition to monitoring recommendations of the TN Department of Health, we will inform our decisions with data from the resources above.

Phases of Reopening

“Safer at home” phase

Current stage as of March 2020

1. Sunday School, Bible study, small group meetings online only;
2. Worship will be available online;
3. Support congregants with spiritual and emotional care on a flexible or virtual basis;
4. Service ministries using safety protocols and only addressing essential needs;
5. Office/staff functions: minimal with drop-in staffing sufficient for essential operations (e.g., mail processing, security) and live streaming of worship. Safety protocol adherence is required at all times.
6. *Most vulnerable congregants*: We recommend that these congregants not gather in person but continue to worship online.
7. No offsite day or overnight trips (e.g., summer CE events, WNL, mission trips)
8. Outdoor activities permitted on the FPC campus (labyrinth, playground, pavilion, memorial garden, etc), with adherence to the safety protocol and “Outdoor facility use checklist,” for the following:
 1. Individuals and families;
 2. Outdoor worship: all to worship in family units; no nursery or Children’s Worship.
 3. Youth activities (e.g., Boy Scouts); and
 4. Mission opportunities
9. Bathroom protocol for outdoor activities to include safety protocol plus:
 1. Use bathrooms in music hallway adjacent to Wilson Hall and Kitchen;
 2. Each user to spray disinfectant supplied in bathroom after use.

Phase 1

Current stage as of _____

Consider only when widespread testing and contact tracing are available and at least 14 days of declining cases or deaths for Williamson, Rutherford, Maury and Davidson Counties:

1. Sunday School, Bible study, small group meetings online only
2. Worship will be available online;
3. Support congregants with spiritual and emotional care on a flexible or virtual basis
4. Service ministries using safety protocols and only addressing essential needs
5. Office functions: minimal with drop-in staffing sufficient for essential operations (e.g., mail processing, security). Safety protocol adherence is required at all times.
6. *Most vulnerable congregants*: See item 6 in “Safer at home.”
7. Session committees: May meet if ≤ 10 members, while adhering to safety protocol. However, preference is to continue meeting online
8. Life rituals (weddings, funerals) with ≤ 10 persons in attendance with priority on immediate family; physical distancing plans in place; safety protocol adherence is required at all times.
9. No offsite day or overnight trips (e.g., summer CE events, WNL, mission trips)
10. Outdoor activities: see items 8 and 9 in “Safer at home.”

Option for limited in-person indoor worship service as part of Phase 1

1. Refer also to the “Indoor Worship Protocol.”
2. Pods: Each individual or family represents a pod, with ≥ 6 feet between each pod and adjacent pods. This will necessitate “boxes” of sufficient size to accommodate each pod. A reservation system will be developed to allow a defined number of pods to attend based on available space.
3. Face masks are required at all times for attendees ≥ 2 years of age.
4. No choir or singing.
5. Bathrooms adjacent to the Parlor will be available with access limited to one person at a time.
6. Church entry and exit: Staggered entry and exit from sanctuary and no entry from preschool entries.

Phase 2

Current stage as of _____

Consider only when Phase 1 criteria met and several additional weeks of decreasing cases or deaths:

1. Sunday School: Online only
2. Worship will be available online
3. Bible study and small group meetings may meet in person with safety protocol adherence and with online option. This includes in-home gatherings for worship, small groups, etc. and the church will be providing for these opportunities.
4. Continue to support congregants with spiritual and emotional care on a flexible or virtual basis
5. Service ministries using safety protocol and only addressing essential needs
6. Office functions: Resume regular office functions with safety protocol adherence required at all times; frequent sanitization of surfaces.
7. *Most vulnerable congregants*: See item 6 in "Safer at home."
8. Session committees: May meet if ≤ 10 members, while adhering to safety protocol. However, preference is to continue meeting online
9. Life rituals (weddings, funerals) with ≤ 10 persons in attendance with priority on immediate family; safety protocol adherence.
10. No offsite day or overnight trips (e.g., summer CE events, WNL, mission trips)
11. Outdoor activities: See items 8 and 9 in "Safer at home."
12. Building users/renters: May resume in limited space with agreement for safety protocol adherence and plan from Facilities Committee for daily sanitization of space

Phase 3

Current stage as of _____

Consider only when Phase 2 criteria met and several additional weeks of decreasing cases or deaths:

1. Safety protocol adherence for all in-person church activities
2. Physical distancing may be relaxed but should be as great as reasonably possible
3. Worship service
 1. Decision for worship services outdoors and/or in sanctuary or Wilson Hall to be determined
 2. Receiving line after worship only for those wearing masks
 3. No-touch alternatives for passing the peace, collecting offering, scripture readings, etc.
 4. Communion/Eucharist and Singing: Adhere to public health and Presbytery recommendations
 5. No indoor fellowship hour
4. Sunday School, Bible study and small group meetings: May meet in person with safety protocol adherence and with online option
5. Continue to support congregants with spiritual and emotional care on a flexible or virtual basis
6. Activities that may resume with contemporary recommendations of public health experts, Presbytery and Session in mind, and with safety protocol adherence per these recommendations:
 1. Service ministries
 2. Office functions
 3. *Most vulnerable congregants* with online option
 4. Session with online option
 5. Life rituals (weddings, funerals)
 6. Onsite ministry event or offsite day or overnight trips (e.g., summer CE events, WNL, mission trips)
 7. Mission trips: recommend local missions
 8. Building users/renters: May resume in limited space with agreement for safety protocol adherence and plan from Facilities Committee for daily sanitization of space.

Phase 4: Full Reopening!!

We are confident the pandemic will come to an end and we will return to full church activities, though we must be careful in our journey through reopening. Full reopening might occur once a vaccine is widely available, when effective treatments are available, and/or when the virus mutates to become less dangerous. We ask for God's protection and guidance as we make this journey together.