

First Presbyterian Church Franklin
Session task force on reopening
Pandemic Reopening Guideline
Version: June 28, 2021

Intended audience for this guideline

First Presbyterian Church, Franklin congregation and staff

Guiding principles:

The Apostles' Creed and 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>
 - Dr. Osterholm's CIDRAP podcasts are an excellent source of Covid information.
6. Resolve to Save Lives Prevent Epidemics: <https://preventepidemics.org/>

Definitions:

1. **SARS-CoV-2** (referred to as **Covid**): 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 of at least 6 feet, frequent hand hygiene with sanitizer, surfaces sanitized frequently

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 task force created by the Session 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 inform 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 = $3/100,000$
- The current rate for Williamson County is 53 new cases/100,000 population per day.

The task force continues to convene weekly to discuss and make decisions on how 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.

The virus will mutate and change, and the pandemic has “evolved” recently. In particular, variants first reported in the U.K. (B.1.1.7) and South Africa (B.1.351) are potentially more infectious and/or resistant to current vaccines. We continue to 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 surge of infections and deaths will occur, 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 more of us are vaccinated.

We continue to pray for a spirit of discernment, for wisdom, and for 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 revised 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 available online;
3. Support congregants with spiritual and emotional care on a flexible or virtual basis;
4. Service ministries using safety protocol 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:
 - Individuals and families:
 - Outdoor worship: all to worship in family units; no nursery or Children’s Worship;
 - Youth activities (e.g., Boy Scouts); and
 - Mission opportunities.
9. Bathroom protocol for outdoor activities to include safety protocol plus:
 - Use bathrooms in music hallway adjacent to Wilson Hall and Kitchen;
 - Each user to spray disinfectant supplied in bathroom after use.

Phase 1

Current stage as of **February 2021**

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 available online
3. Support congregants with spiritual and emotional care on a flexible or virtual basis
4. Service ministries using safety protocol 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. Committees 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 as part of Phases 1 – 3

1. Individual pre-screening for illness:
 1. Please do not attend if you have fever, cold symptoms, loss of taste or smell, or other signs or symptoms of illness, or if you have been exposed to someone with the Covid virus.
 2. If you become Covid positive after attendance, please notify the church staff. We will make every effort to preserve confidentiality.
2. RSVP for attendance:
 1. Please RSVP for attendance on the FPC website or by calling the church office.
 2. Group size will be used to provide seating with physical distancing.
 3. Group seating location will be recorded for Covid tracking should congregants become Covid positive.
3. Childcare: Indoor nursery will not be available; however, outdoor Children’s Worship will be available for both services.
4. Church entry and exit: Staggered entry and exit from sanctuary. Those attending will receive an email with entry and exit instructions.
5. Physical distancing: Seating will provide ≥ 6 feet between individuals or families. Please do not congregate indoors.
6. Personal protection measures:
 1. Please consider your age, health and vaccination status, and comfort level in deciding whether to attend indoor worship.

2. Face masks are required at all times for those aged > 2 years, with the mask covering nose, mouth, and chin. Surgical masks will be available. Cloth masks with at least 3 layers, one of which has a tight weave, are the next best to an N95.
3. Eye protection is recommended.
4. Alcohol-based cleanser will be available an entry and exit.
7. Singing and responsive readings:
 1. No choir or singing other than a soloist.
 2. Responsive readings (e.g., The Lord's Prayer): Congregants should bow heads and speak quietly.
8. Bathrooms: Bathrooms adjacent to the offices will be available with access limited to one person at a time.

Phase 2 with limited return to indoor activities, revised in accordance with CDC guideline 03.08.21
 Current stage as of **April 13, 2021**

The task force and Session have carefully, prayerfully considered these next steps of reopening, including the accumulating evidence that our youth are at less risk of infection, becoming ill, or transmitting Covid to others, yet are at much greater risk of the adverse mental and emotional health consequences of the pandemic. The **Sanctuary, Wilson Hall, and Barr Conference Room** (3 large spaces) are most suited to physical distancing and will be used for some of these activities.

The CDC issued interim recommendations for **fully vaccinated** (≥ 2 weeks after receiving the last required dose of vaccine) people on March 8, recommending that those who are fully vaccinated may:

- Visit with other fully vaccinated people indoors without wearing masks or physical distancing
- Visit with unvaccinated people from a single household who are at low risk for severe Covid-19 disease indoors without wearing masks or physical distancing
- Refrain from quarantine and testing following a known exposure if asymptomatic

An important caveat is that, though the vaccines protect us from severe disease, we do not yet know if they prevent us from developing "long-haul" symptoms if one has a mild COVID-19 after vaccination. For this reason, the CDC recommends that we continue to wear a mask and physically distance when visiting unvaccinated people. We get the vaccine to protect ourselves; we wear a mask and physically distance to protect others.

We are reminded of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and our Christian obligation to love and care for one another, to "Go and do likewise." Indeed, our country believes so strongly in this creed that all 50 states have Good Samaritan Laws, and when we take simple measures, such as masking to protect those around us, we are acting as Good Samaritans.

Our updated guidelines are informed with the CDC guidelines in mind but also recommend that our *safety protocol* (masks and physical distancing) continue to be observed. Our revised guidelines now allow for the following:

1. Indoor activities allowed with safety protocol in place and scheduling through the church office:
 - a. Youth and children: may meet in one of our large indoor spaces or offsite.
 - b. Fully vaccinated adults: may meet with face masks and with continued online option.
 - c. Service ministries: may use one of our 3 large spaces when needed.
2. Worship available online, with limited in-person indoor worship under Phase 1.
3. Continue to support congregants with spiritual and emotional care on a flexible or virtual basis.
4. Office functions: Resume regular office functions with safety protocol adherence and frequent sanitization of surfaces. Church office will open to the congregation on May 3.
5. *Most vulnerable congregants*: We recommend that these congregants decide whether to attend in-person activities based on their vaccination status, underlying health concerns, willingness to adhere to our safety protocol, and other individual considerations.
6. Life rituals (weddings, funerals): follow limited indoor worship guidelines under Phase 1.
7. Building users/renters: These activities are suspended until further consideration.

8. In-person visitation (e.g., with home-bound): Individuals visiting others are expected to be fully vaccinated and to adhere to our *safety protocol*.

Phase 3

Current stage as of June 28, 2021

This phase includes reopening provisions of Phase 2 and is informed by the CDC guideline

(https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/pdfs/324153_choosingSaferActivities11.pdf).

These changes are possible in large part because the vaccine has been highly effective in protecting the vaccinated individual from acquiring the virus, developing Covid illness, and transmitting the virus. **We strongly recommend that everyone >12 years of age get the vaccine unless they have contraindications.**

1. Unvaccinated individuals >2 years: Face masks should be worn for indoor activities.
2. Vaccinated individuals: Masks are optional. Those who prefer to wear a mask are encouraged to do so and are available in the narthex. **The greatest risk is to unvaccinated individuals, so please plan accordingly.**
3. Worship service:
 - Further modifications of worship service in sanctuary
 - Communion may resume
 - Offering plate may be passed
 - Congregational singing may resume
 - No indoor fellowship hour
4. Sunday School, Bible studies, committees, and other small groups: May meet indoors with online option
5. Continue to support congregants with spiritual and emotional care on a flexible or virtual basis.
6. *Most vulnerable congregants*: We recommend that these congregants decide whether to attend in-person activities based on their vaccination status, underlying health concerns, willingness to adhere to our safety protocol, and other individual considerations.
7. Activities that may resume or be further expanded with contemporary recommendations of public health experts, Presbytery and Session in mind, and with safety protocol adherence per these recommendations and continued online options where possible:
 - Service ministries
 - Office functions
 - Life rituals (weddings, funerals)
 - Onsite ministry events and offsite day or overnight trips (e.g., summer CE events, mission trips)
 - Youth offsite day and overnight activities (e.g., NaCoMe, Montreat): The task force is planning these for summer 2021. Safety measures that will be required include:
 1. Masks are encouraged for unvaccinated individuals.
 2. Vaccination is strongly recommended for all eligible individuals >12 years of age.
 - Building users/renters: To be determined by reopening task force.

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.