

# HOW DO WE COME BACK TOGETHER?

A SPECIAL EDITON OF

## The Church Bell

MAY 8, 2020



We've all said it: *Can't wait to be back together!*

We are longing for the fellowship, the smiles, and yes, the handshakes and hugs. When can we be together like that again? The more we learn, it is becoming apparent it may be for a while. Your regathering task force and your staff are attending webinars and reading articles and listening to podcasts specific to church guidelines during the pandemic. Governor Lee's Executive Order and Bishop Taylor's statement each have guidelines. Instead of a grand opening day, *phased openings* are being discussed. And those look different based on the size and scope of the church.

There are so many things to consider:

- Offer several services on a Sunday thoroughly cleaning the worship space between each service.  
*How many?*  
*Which room is easier to 'thoroughly clean'?*  
*Should we have everything in Wesley Hall? Or Asbury?*
- Congregants must be at least six feet apart.  
*I thought that certainly every other pew is fine. Nope. We measured. In our sanctuary, it would be every third pew.*
- There should be no singing.  
*No singing?*
- Everyone enter and exit the same door; no loitering!  
*I'm thinking of those of you who are the last to leave as you stand in the narthex and visit.*

## Timeout!

It is almost too much to think about! So, let's think about other things! No, this is not denial. It is refocusing.

We have learned new ways to be together. We *are* able to be together online. You send Facebook greetings during worship to one another (I call that passing notes in church! That used to be a no-no; it is now highly encouraged!) You are inviting your cousin in North Dakota to watch worship with you on YouTube. You are sending the links from the Wednesday Word and the Twelve Steps from Recovery to your grandchildren. Sunday School classes are learning to Zoom. At staff meeting last week, we discussed more opportunities for you to connect. You can sing along with Chris or Terry as loudly as you want! You can even fast-forward through the sermon if you are not watching the live version! You may miss that feature "when we get back"!

There is a lot to figure out and you've got some focused and brilliant people working on timelines and plans with an unknown start date! Bless them! The team has put together a "Frequently Asked Questions" document to help us refocus and think beyond the way it used to be. I know we love each other, but we do not want to harm one another. The primary purpose of worship is WORSHIP. We can worship God wherever we are. A bonus of worship is the fellowship. I am thankful that we can still connect and feel the Holy Spirit between us and in us through newsletters, emails, phone calls, and zoom. ***Bless be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love!***

This special edition of *The Church Bell* will be the first of more communications to come.

*Catherine*



**When will we be able to regather?**

We must start by stating the obvious: It's still somewhat unknown.

The state has issued gathering guidelines that include:

- Maintaining 6 feet of separation between unrelated persons.
- Maximum occupancy limits of 50% of room capacity.
- Mandatory face coverings.
- Excluding vulnerable persons including everyone 65 years and older, people with disabilities, people with serious respiratory or cardiovascular conditions, people who are immunocompromised.
- No nursery or children’s activities.
- Recommendations against choirs and congregational singing.
- No coffee or food.

<b>Clergy Phone Numbers</b>	
<i>Rev. Catherine Nance</i>	865-660-2082
<i>Rev. Sarah Slack</i>	865-640-0807
<i>Rev. Matt Hall</i>	276-733-5207
<i>Rev. Nathan Irwin</i>	865-591-5234

Our Holston Conference Bishop, Dindy Taylor, has mandated that, “Our United Methodist Churches are not to be open. We will reopen our churches when it is safe to do so across the entire Conference.”

Also, “We feel the best decision for the Conference is to “reopen” in a unified and measured manner. Even then, it will not automatically be back to being fully open from the start. We will work on and submit guidelines to implement a gradual reopening so we can continue making the health and safety of our church people as well as our communities the highest priority.”

You can read her entire statement at [1stchurch.org/response](http://1stchurch.org/response).

**During this intervening period, the Regathering Task Force is considering a myriad of factors:**

- How do we keep our average Sunday attendance of over 600 people at least 6 feet away from each other at all times?
- How do we limit worship attendance and determine who can come?
- How do we arrange our worship areas in a way that makes that possible?
- How many people are we able to fit in that space at-one-time while socially distanced?
- Is worship invite-only? How do we handle overflow?
- How many worship services would we need to have to serve that many people?
- How do we clean and sanitize the building sufficiently between each service?
- How do we obtain the needed cleaning supplies when the supply chain is backed up for weeks?
- What do we do about nursery? Kids & Student ministry? Small groups and Sunday School classes?
- How do we handle communion, baptisms, choirs?
- What if key staff members or volunteers are medically fragile and can't risk being exposed to others?

These are just a handful of the innumerable logistical questions that come with regathering a 2,000-member church. The fact is, there are hundreds of decisions that need to be made in order to regather in a way that is logistically realistic, socially responsible, and keeps everyone safe.

<b>Regathering Task Force Members</b>			
Joey Smith	Justin Small	Mary Beth West	Dr. Cheryl Coleman
Rev. Sarah Slack	Rev. Nathan Irwin	Mark Blodgett	

## REGATHERING FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **What will the plan for regathering look like?**

We will implement a four phase plan for regathering based upon CDC recommendations while taking into account local viral transmission rates and mechanisms. Each subsequent phase will allow larger group sizes and less restrictions on group types and activity levels.

### **How will we decide when it's time to move from phase to phase?**

The movement from one phase to the next will be determined by taking into account local viral transmission rates and mechanisms and health authority recommendations. Depending on data, these phases may move forward or backward in the months to come.

### **I'm not comfortable coming to worship once the church regathers. Is this ok?**

#### **How will I stay connected?**

Yes! The Lord meets you right where you are, and we will too. Worship will still be streamed for those who cannot or choose not to attend worship in person when the time comes.

### **Are there ways that I can be connected now?**

Yes – with online Sunday worship and the Wednesday Word (and lots of past services on the website and YouTube). Some Sunday School classes and groups are zooming; staff is reaching out to all to encourage social media contact; 'phone trees' (members calling one another until all are contacted); Facebook devotionals; Upper Rooms online; and children's Sunday School lessons on YouTube.

### **How can I get spiritual support from one of the ministers?**

Call the church office at 982-1273. Messages are retrieved and forwarded to ministers. Ministers are contacting parishioners who have health concerns or who are facing some personal crisis. Although ministers and volunteers are not able to visit in-person at this time, prayer still happens over the phone and email and texts! Hospital and nursing home personnel are gracious in their response to ministers in getting messages to families who are in ICU waiting areas or other parts of the facility. You may also send a message through [info@1stchurch.org](mailto:info@1stchurch.org)

### **I want to return to worship. What's being done to clean the church facilities?**

We are putting together a sanitization crew who will wipe down or spray areas with sanitizing cleaner during and after services. We're asking all staff and greeters to wear face masks as appropriate. Hand sanitizer will be available. We are also encouraging the congregation to bring and wear face masks to protect our neighbors, but we will have disposable masks available for those that do not have their own.

### **Can my Sunday school class and/or Bible study group meet together in person?**

There will be a phased-in approach to all group meetings. In order to maintain adequate separation, groups may have the opportunity to meet at alternate days/times and in larger rooms.

### **When will things go back to normal?**

While we anticipate a new normal, we don't anticipate a return to the way things were prior to COVID-19. We don't know when a public handshake or a hug will be ok again. What we do know, is that the God of all creation is still in control. Nothing is a surprise to Him, and we will trust in the Lord as we seek his face together. The message is important, not the method!

### **How can I give my tithe and offerings during this time?**

- Give online at [1stchurch.org/giving](https://1stchurch.org/giving). This is a quick, easy and safe way to give.
- Give by texting **1stchurch** to **73256**.
- Mail a check to First UMC, **804 Montvale Station Road, Maryville, TN 37803**.
- Most banks offer bill pay services with recurring payment options.

### **How can I be praying for the church in the days to come?**

Please pray that God would be glorified in all we do. Pray for the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us. Pray for the name of Jesus Christ to be lifted high and for the Good News to spread through our witness together. Pray for God's patience and peace, unity and strength. Pray for endurance of the leadership and for protection of the flock. Pray for an end to this pandemic.

Please help us further by completing a short survey at:

[1stchurch.org/survey](https://1stchurch.org/survey)

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