

Ask the Pastor: When Will We Worship in the Sanctuary Again?

As the prevalence of COVID-19 begins to subside in Minnesota and some churches around town have begun to hold sanctuary worship again, church leadership has begun gauging the interest and advisability of doing the same. By now you should have received an invitation to take a survey about your own readiness to return to in-person worship at BUMC. The survey results will help us to understand how to best make some of the complicated tradeoffs that we face in transitioning back to worship.

The basic rules of thumb that Bishop Ough has asked all Minnesota United Methodists to follow (John Wesley actually asked these of us first) are to: 1) Do no harm; 2) Do all the good we can; and 3) Stay in love with God. It's the desire to avoid doing harm to those most vulnerable in our community that is the primary motive behind our Phased Re-Gathering Plan for Churches (<https://www.minnesotaumc.org/regatheringplan>). If you haven't yet had a chance to read the Bishop's plan, please do so. There can be no doubt that the disruption of our regular worship gatherings has been a hardship and a hindrance to our mission, and yet I believe we have also made a significant difference in doing our part to slow the transmission of the coronavirus and to demonstrate our love of neighbor in this way.

We are currently in the "Yellow" phase of our regathering plan. Here's what that means in practical terms. In accordance with this stage of the plan:

Everyone should wear a mask, frequently wash hands, and observe at least six feet of physical distance when sharing the church building and church grounds with others. Using hand sanitizer is an alternative when handwashing is not practical. Nobody should come to the church building or church grounds if they have a fever or other symptoms consistent with COVID-19.

Church Staff continue to work remotely whenever possible and deliberately stagger building use with other staff. Church office hours are by appointment and the church telephone continues to be answered during business hours. Staff remain available electronically and by telephone.

Church Ministry Groups are asked to continue to meet electronically, or to meet outdoors while wearing masks and observing safe physical

distances of at least six feet. If there is a compelling reason that it is necessary to meet in-person and indoors, then the standard precautions should be followed (see next item), but most church ministry groups can best avoid doing harm by continuing to meet with a lower risk, either electronically or outside.

Outside Groups. The AA program has a unique need for in-person meeting and is well-suited for small meeting sizes in a remote part of the church building. Under the "Yellow" phase of our regathering plan, we are now inviting AA groups of 10 or less to gather in the Education wing of the church using standard safety measures such as *not sharing coffee or food, mandatory mask wearing, removing tables to increase physical distancing, sanitizing surfaces after meetings, and entering and existing through the doorway closest to their meeting room.*

Funerals and Burials. Pastor Bill will now be conducting graveside memorial/interment services with attendances limited to below 50, provided masks are worn and it is possible to maintain a distance of at least six feet between groups that are currently living together. These are not full funerals, but are intended to help grieving families and friends say goodbye to loved ones.

Baptisms. In the UMC, we believe that baptism is an important sacrament but not something that is required for salvation. Baptism inherently involves the community of God's people gathered in covenant. Consequently, until we resume in-person worship and can determine that those coming for baptism aren't facing undue risk, baptisms are being postponed.

Membership. Virtually nothing we do as the Body of Christ requires church membership, and we have always encouraged people to begin living into what it means to be a part of our church before joining. Membership is, however, a meaningful covenant involving the gathered community, and we look forward to receiving new members again once we have resumed in-person worship and determine a safe and meaningful way to celebrate that covenant.

Outside Gatherings. Gathering together outside is significantly safer when the Minnesota weather (and mosquitos) permits it! We have

already hosted some limited in-car prayer and worship times in our church parking lot and are currently considering ways to host some July gatherings on Wednesday evenings that would allow us to get out of our cars and congregate safely on a shady part of the church property. Per the plan, mask wearing would still be required and congregational singing discouraged, but we are working to imagine some creative ways to gather in this way. Outside gatherings are currently limited to 50 people, although this number could be increased if we find that gatherings are able to maintain safe contact precautions.

In-Person, Sanctuary Worship. Under the current phase of the regathering plan, worship in our sanctuary is allowable, but there are a large number of costs and constraints that have led us to be slow in returning to the sanctuary. Your survey responses will help us to gauge your readiness to try this, but please carefully consider the following elements of what worship will look like when we decide to make this change. Note that as we progress to further relaxation of COVID-19 precautions, many of these constraints will become relaxed as well.

1) Reservation Only with Multiple, Staggered Services. Our church pews and cozy sanctuary size don't serve us well in a pandemic, so we'll be challenged to measure off safe physical distances in the sanctuary. A space that would normally be full at around 200 would likely be limited to as few as 50 at a time (adopting the plan's more conservative guideline of 25% capacity). As a result of the lower capacity, it's likely we won't all get to gather with everyone we would like to see on Sunday morning. Another result is that, depending on demand, we might need to offer as many as three or four different service times, meaning some will be able to worship when they want to worship while others will be required to adjust to a less comfortable schedule.

2) Curtailed Worship Rituals. Per the plan, there will be no congregational singing during the Yellow phase of the regathering plan, no hugging or handshaking, no passing of an offering plate, and no common cup or loaf during communion. It's likely that the musical team leading worship will also be reduced. There would be no fellowship time after worship and no sharing of treats and coffee.

3) Discontinuation of High-Production Online Worship. Our high-quality online worship has been appreciated by so many over these months, but it has been especially helpful for those with health complications that make them vulnerable to infections, as well as those living out of town or in care facilities. Because of limitations on leadership time, once in-person worship resumes it will be necessary to discontinue the high level of effort currently invested in producing the weekly online worship recordings (i.e., we can do one or the other, but not both well using the current approach). Because of limitations on our technology, we will not be able to use the same recording setup currently in place to record live, in-person worship. While a team is continuing to work on a technology roadmap for this scenario, we would currently have to resort to something like setting a phone in the back of the sanctuary (the sound and visual quality would be dramatically reduced). More time before regathering would allow us more time to get an adequate recording system in place so as not to disenfranchise those who are not able to be with us in person.

Summary. This continues to be a challenging time for everyone. Although the church has never really closed, I do understand the pressing desire felt by some to return to our church sanctuary, as well as the stark reality faced by a significant percentage of our congregation that the CDC would consider to be at an elevated risk for serious COVID-19 complications. We will continue to monitor the guidance given to us by Bishop Ough and I am eager to hear your own ideas and feedback. It could very well be that you're the one with the idea and the energy that will help us through this time of transition! Meanwhile, please patiently endure the uncertainty that we all must face in these days for a while longer.

Shalom,
Pastor Bill