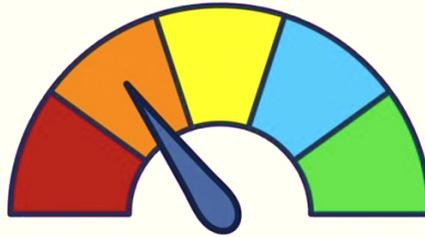


COVID-19 Precautions Update (1/14/21)

See also, *COVID & The Church: Frequently Asked Questions*

Current Phase: Orange



Good News! The pandemic isn't over, but the case rates in Wright County have been consistently decreasing since their peak at the end of November of 2020. We are still taking a cautious approach, uncertain of whether there will be another wave of infections. Nevertheless, we are able to relax a few precautions, as noted by underlined green text.

Phased Regathering Plan. 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 Regathering 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, as well as the Bishop's most recent letter. The Cabinet has dialed us forward to the "Orange" phase of our regathering plan. Here's what that means in practical terms:

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.

While groups are still encouraged to meet virtually or outside, groups that must meet inside may do so but are limited to a maximum of 10 people.

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.* Groups that must meet inside are limited to a maximum of 10 people. Please check with the church office for a list of cleaning and other hygiene requirements for meeting indoors at church (see guidelines under **Outside Groups** below).

Children's and Youth Ministries. Per the Regathering Plan, all children's and youth ministries such as Sunday School, Confirmation, and Youth Group will continue to meet online.

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 "Orange" phase of our regathering plan, AA groups of 10 or less may 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 exiting through the doorway closest to their meeting room.

Funerals and Burials. Pastor Bill may now lead indoor memorial services offsite at managed facilities such as funeral chapels, provided that attendance is limited to 10 or fewer people,

masks are worn, and physical distancing precautions are followed. Pastor Bill may conduct outdoor graveside memorial/interment services with attendances limited to 10 or fewer people, 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. Baptisms are being deferred until further notice. Outdoor, distanced baptisms will resume when either the outside weather improves or the pandemic eases.

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 permits it! Masks and physical distance should still be observed. Meeting outside is a viable option for many church ministry groups while the weather remains hospitable. *However, please note that we are asking that Children's and Youth gatherings remain online for now.*

In-Person, Sanctuary Worship. This type of gathering is the most challenging in terms of maintaining a safe environment, largely because of the factors of poor air flow, larger numbers, confined space, and extended exposure duration. Nevertheless, there WILL come a time when we are ready to resume in-person sanctuary worship. The first step toward will be watch parties, where physically distant groups will meet indoors, with masks, to watch online worship broadcasts on Sunday morning. With the rise of COVID prevalence throughout the Midwest this fall, plans for the first watch parties were postponed. We hope to reschedule our first watch party when there is a reduction in the spread of the virus. Meanwhile, the church is now installing the necessary AV technology which will allow us to continue online broadcasts even after we have transitioned into more regular indoor worship.

Summary. This continues to be a challenging time for everyone, but we are turning the corner! 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 are at an elevated risk for serious COVID-19 complications. We will continue to monitor the guidance given to us by the Minnesota Annual Conference, as well as State and Wright County epidemiological data such as 14-day caseload per 10,000. Meanwhile, please patiently endure the uncertainty that we all must face in these days for a while longer. I'm so encouraged by the large number of you who have been creative and flexible in adapting to the new ways we are adopting to be in ministry these days. Have a good idea for trying something new? The staff, Leadership Team, and I would love to hear from you.

Grace and Peace,
Pastor Bill

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