



HEARTLAND CONFERENCE

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
N. KY • OH • WV

May 15, 2020

A Pastoral Letter on Re-gathering for Worship and Congregational Life (Letter #6)

Dear Friends in Christ,

The COVID 19 road is a long one. We recognize that this journey is requiring extraordinary energy, innovation, and patience. Given the recent re-opening plans that are being engaged at the state level in Ohio, West Virginia, and Kentucky, we have been asked by a number of you for guidance about when to re-engage in-person worship. We acknowledge that each congregation has the authority and responsibility to discern what will constitute a safe environment for all as re-gathering is considered. We also recognize there are different contexts that may nuance the timing of any particular congregation's re-engagement with in-person worship.

Unlike our previous pastoral letters where we offered counsel about not worshipping prior to a specific date, we realize a more nuanced approach, based on science, must be the guide at this point in time.

A key threshold for initial consideration about re-engaging in-person worship that we found in documents from throughout the country is 14 consecutive days of decline in COVID 19 cases. This information is updated daily at the following websites: Ohio, West Virginia, and Kentucky. These sites will give you information by state. However, being in touch with your local county health department will give a more nuanced picture of COVID 19's trajectory in your particular area. A directory of all local health departments nationwide may be accessed by clicking [here](#).

Of course, this threshold alone should not be your only consideration. There are many protocols that need to guide a decision to re-engage in-person worship including such things:

- Size of the sanctuary – compared to the number of people worshipping and whether this ratio can safely assure physical distancing of six feet or more.
- The average age of your members
- Cleaning and sterilizing plans
- Face masks – Will masks be made available for those who arrive without a mask? There are many other considerations.

An exhaustive check-list of re-engagement protocols may be found by clicking on this link. We are thankful for the work of Rev. Dr. Ginny Brown Daniel, Conference Minister of the Missouri Mid-South Conference for her thorough research and plan which is the basis of what we share.

As you review that plan, you will note that there are various stages described beginning with a very small number of people gathering and growing over time to a larger number. A summary chart of the re-engagement process can be found at the end of the document. Full re-engagement will likely only be safe once a vaccine is widely available.

To better understand how COVID 19 spreads and the risks for gathering in person, we offer an article by the immunologist, Professor Erin Bromage, entitled "The Risks – Know Them – Avoid Them" which may be found by clicking [here](#). A video offered by a United Methodist Pastor from West Virginia further highlights the considerations and challenges of in-person worship. It may be found by clicking [here](#).



We realize that this kind of discernment is challenging, given the fact that much of the rest of the world seems to be getting back to life much more quickly. However, the unique quality of interpersonal touch and the close physical proximity around which many of our worship practices are shaped demands special care and a much more cautious strategy for the safety and well-being of our faith communities.

As always we are glad to discuss your strategies around in-person worship and be of support to you. We hold you in our prayers and give thanks to God for the love which guides our thoughtful reflection in this important process of discernment.

Blessings on you!

Rev. Dan Busch
Rev. Nayiri Karjian
Rev. Patricia Battle
Rev. Carl Robinson
Rev. David Long-Higgins