

As of April 27, 2020 the following information is provided as a tool to help you and your church make the best informed decisions possible to ensure the safety of your congregation and your community.

Throughout this Re-Launch process you must follow CDC guidelines for the number of people who can gather safely in a group.

The Reopening West Virginia Strong guidelines announced today still indicate no timeline for when potential gatherings of 25 persons may be possible.

Churches must NOT exceed guideline numbers.

Currently—there is no timeline for when stay-at-home orders will be lifted.

Thank you for being the church during this time of crisis!

This situation has proven to us and everyone that the church is NOT a building. Well done!

This is a season with more questions than answers for us as ministry leaders in the West Virginia Conference. We need to be sure we are asking, discussing, and thinking about the right questions. For example, what's most important right now is not "IF" our churches/charges will reopen, or even "WHEN" they will reopen—but "HOW" they will they reopen.

How can our churches best reopen the building to the public so that we ensure the care and safety of those who worship with us in-person are our main concern? Remember, the Coronavirus will likely still be active in our area for some time, and effective treatments/vaccines are still some time off in the future. In some scenarios, we may be looking at a series of start and stop situations for at least the rest of 2020.

The following are guidelines from Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball and the extended cabinet intended for each church/charge to use as you prepare to return to some form of in-person worship.

** The following are all based on what we know right now.*

** Updates and revisions may be communicated as we all progress through this unique situation.*

**Re-Launch
Team**

- We encourage each church to establish a Re-Launch team now to begin discussing, discerning, and planning what it will look like to add some elements of on-site in-person worship to your current worship process. This team should include the pastor and one or two other key ministry leaders. While we are still in “stay-at-home” requirements, the team can meet online (i.e. Zoom) or on the phone regularly. (Maybe weekly at first) Who do you need to have on your Re-Launch team?

**Re-Launch
Resources**

- Visit the West Virginia Conference website [www.wvumc.org/congregational-vitality-initiative/re-launch] to find resources designed to assist you and your church as you move toward some version of in-person worship services.

**Re-Launch
Phases**

- As you and your church begin to think and plan for in-person worship, it would be best for you to think in terms of phases. The current situation is very fluid, and new information is available almost every day, but most medical experts are encouraging phases of “re-opening” our conference areas.
- Chances are you will not be able to meet with your whole church at one time in phase one. We may be under some type of group size restrictions. (No more than 10, 20 or so people at a time.)
- As an example: A church with an average worship size of 40 may need to plan for two small worship services limited to 10 people each on a Sunday morning, in addition to continuing their online worship for the rest of their congregation and community.
- In the event someone in your congregation tests positive for COVID-19, you will have to halt in-person worship AND communicate that to everyone.

Re-Launch

Phases

Continued

- What will phase one, phase two, and phase three look like in your church?
- Be sure to stay informed and current with state regulations and guidelines in which your congregation is located—West Virginia or Maryland as well as all CDC and local health department guidelines.

Re-Launch

Sanitation

- The church facilities need to be totally cleaned and sanitized before you move into any form of in-person worship. Who will lead that process for your church? When do you plan to have that completed?
- You will also need a plan to sanitize all surfaces after every in-person service or meeting of any type. Who will lead this process in your church?
- We would refer you to the current CDC guidelines for cleaning and sanitizing. [www.cdc.gov]
- Cleaning and sanitizing resources may be hard to come by in some areas. How will you deal with any shortages of materials and resources in your area? (home-made solutions? canceling services if the facilities cannot be cleaned?)
- Currently there is a strong possibility that people will be asked to wear masks when out in public. If that is the situation, what happens if someone comes to a service not wearing a mask? Do you plan to have masks available on-site?

Re-Launch
Worship
Services

- For the first few phases of your church Re-Launch, you will likely need to hold shorter services (30 or so minutes) and hold more services than you did pre-COVID. The number of services will depend on your church size and how many people have told you they want to begin worshipping in-person. (You will need to continue to follow all CDC guidelines for the number of people gathered in your space.) We encourage you also to factor into your plans new people in your community who will be coming to worship with you for the first time.
- Be sure to continue your online worship!
- Do not hand out bulletins or anything to people. (Maybe place them on a table) Consider removing all hymnals, Bibles, anything in the pews or other locations that might be handled.
- What are your plans in situations where you are at maximum safe numbers, and a first-time family shows up for a service?
- Who will be responsible for reminding people to practice safe social distancing?
- Health experts now are recommending NO singing in public settings due to the high risk of virus droplets in the air. This would mean no choirs of any type also.
- All church facilities are unique, so it is impossible for us to give you specific guidelines for your church in all areas. Here are some questions; we encourage you to adjust to the context of your church:
 - How will you ensure social distancing in your worship service? (blocking off pews, roping off sections, etc.)
 - How will you help people maintain a safe space when entering and exiting your facilities? (one-way entrance and one-way exit?)
 - What will you do about areas of the church facilities where it might be impossible to maintain social distancing? (hallways, bathrooms, kitchen, etc.)

Re-Launch

Offering

Collecting

- We recommend that all churches suspend the practice of passing any type of offering plate during in-person worship services for at least the remainder of 2020. The chance of cross contamination is too great. Your church will need to utilize some type of container stationed away from people for the collection of tithes, gifts, offerings, and other materials that would normally be placed in an offering plate or basket.
- Those collecting and counting the offering will need to do so following guidelines for safe social distancing and wearing gloves.
- Many of our churches have successfully moved to some form of online giving in the past few weeks. In fact, many of those churches are reporting an increase in giving since adding that option. If your church has not done that yet, we encourage you to do so now.

Re-Launch

Children &

Youth

- We are encouraging churches not to offer any types of nursery, children, or youth ministry in-person until public schools are in session.
- You may still want to do some form of children's time during your worship, just do not invite any children to come forward or to gather together.

Re-Launch

Baptisms

- Follow the same general guidelines covered in the Worship section. Children and infants should remain in their parents arms. If more than one person is being baptized, then you will need to have enough separate water containers for each individual baptism.
- Pastors will need to use hand sanitizer between multiple baptisms.
- Parents and pastors should not walk the child up and down the aisle as part of the celebration.

Re-Launch

**Meet &
Greet /
Passing the
Peace /
Greeters**

- We recommend that all churches suspend any practices which include people shaking hands or touching each other in any way until we receive different information from medical professionals. This will be very hard for some people in our congregations.
- Pastors, church staff, and all laity leaders are encouraged to take this very seriously and to model the way for others. We are not asking you to be the “Hand-Shake Police,” but we are reminding you that all it takes is one person in your congregation to be a carrier who could potentially infect your whole church. No one wants that.
- What are your plans to ensure people know and understand this change?
- How will you monitor this in your church before, during, and after any in-person worship or other gatherings?

Re-Launch

**Bathrooms
& Kitchen**

- What is your plan to clean and sanitize all the bathrooms in your church prior to any phase of Re-Launch? Who will be responsible and when will it be completed? How often will the bathrooms be cleaned and sanitized during and after any on-site gatherings?
- We recommend that you not have people in the kitchen until such a time as you are able to ensure both their safety and the safety of anyone who might consume food from your kitchen.
- You should also suspend any type of coffee, cookies, or other options where people would gather and thus risk cross contamination.

- Once you and the Re-Launch team have plans in place for the next phase of in-person worship, the challenge then is to communicate that plan to everyone. We encourage you to think in terms of people groups as you make your communication plans.
 - For example: (1) Those people most connected to your church pre-COVID and now; (2) people who attended from time-to-time in the past and might be joining you online a little now; (3) people who are on your membership rolls but you have not seen them for a while and may or may not have connected with you online; (4) people who did not attend your church pre-COVID but have found you online; (5) those in your mission field who are still not connected to your church but may be looking for a church home soon.

**Re-Launch
Communication**

- We encourage you to begin reaching out to those already connected to your church now to ask them: “How likely are you to want to worship with us in-person once that is an option?” There may be some people in your current congregation who will not want to risk gathering with other people for a while.
- You should also try to connect with any new people who have started watching your services online to ask them how likely they are to move to in-person worship once that is an option.
- The information you gather from contacting people now will help to inform you on how many in-person worship services you will need to hold when that becomes an option.
- Who will be responsible for communicating changing worship information to each of these groups in your church? This needs to include website and any physical signing.

**Re-Launch
Communion**

- At this time there is no clear, truly safe way to serve Communion to larger gatherings in the ways we have done in the past.
- However, we are working on guidelines that will help congregations think through the procedures and questions they will need to consider for the safety of the congregation before adding the celebration of this sacrament back into their in-person gatherings.
- We are working with health experts on this question and this additional aspect of the guidelines will be forthcoming.

Reaching New People Now

- We are hearing reports from all sizes of churches around our conference who have been reaching new people since moving their worship services online.
- How has your church been connecting with new people since we have not been able to gather in person? What are your plans to invite them to attend a service in your church building once that is an option? How will you continue to reach new people during and after your Re-Launch?
- You may recall that after 9/11 most churches in our conference saw an increase in their worship attendance of 20-30% or more. There are people now who are predicting that same type of increase in the coming weeks. (We may be seeing signs of that from online engagement now.) You may also remember that after about six weeks most churches's attendance went back down to where it was before. In some cases, that is because we were not prepared for those new people and we did not help them connect into our churches.
- What can you and your Re-Launch team do now to prepare for new people God will be sending us in the coming weeks and months?

Counting Attendance

- There have been some questions about how churches should be counting and reporting worship attendance. The year-end reports already include a place for “Number of persons who worship online.” Due to the variety of ways churches are offering online worship it is impossible for us to tell you exactly what number you should be using. Our advice at this point is to just be consistent from week to week.
- Churches who are part of our VitalSigns pilot program do now have a place to enter your online worship attendance each week.

Second Wave

No one wants to think about a second wave of Coronavirus while we are still dealing with the first wave—but the medical experts are telling us that this is a very real possibility.

We encourage you and your Re-Launch team to keep this in mind while you are making plans to move back into some phase of in-person worship services.

The work you do now, and the learnings you have from this first wave will help you if and when there is a second wave. Keep good notes on what works and what does not. Keep a list of things you would have done differently or best practices you are hearing from other churches.