

UNY Church Reopening Guidelines¹

Editor's Note: Though a firm timetable for when churches will be permitted to reopen is not currently available, recent statements by the New York Governor's office indicate churches fall in phase 4, the last category of institutions allowed to reopen. It remains the best practice for all churches to consult their local county department of health for specific guidelines.

Introduction: John Wesley said, "The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness," emphasizing the centrality of community in the life of the disciple. He also established "do no harm" as a primary practice of faithful living.

UNY's church reopening guidelines seek to balance these two values - community and well-being - in ways that are faithful, reasonable and practical. They are offered to assist pastors and church leaders in their work of planning for the resumption of in-person gatherings for worship, education, fellowship, leadership, and community outreach.

Core Principles:

- **Start Small, Move Cautiously:** Covid-19 spreads primarily through in-person gatherings; therefore, the safest way to reduce contagion is to limit the frequency and size of gatherings. Reopening should proceed incrementally with utmost caution, with only a few people gathering in-person at first. Over time, as positive tests and hospitalizations continue to decline and testing and tracing increases, larger gatherings will be possible.
- **Regional and Local Authorities and Leaders Know Best:** Different regions across Upper New York will reopen at different times and at different rates based on local conditions and decisions. When seeking to determine the size and timing of in-person gatherings, pastors and congregational leaders will need to seek guidance from their [county department of health](#).
- **Smart Practices Make the Difference:** The practices of social distancing (six-feet apart, limited gatherings), wearing personal protection equipment (such as masks), and adopting heightened cleansing regimens (including handwashing) are needed now and will continue to be needed in the future.
- **Revisions and Updates are the Norm:** The virus and its impact on guidelines and practices will change to align with new circumstances and information. These guidelines will be revised as needed; please plan to check-the Conference website at least once a week for updates.
- **Nothing is Wasted:** Even in this crisis, churches are learning important new things. Pastors and congregational leaders can apply new learnings from our time worshipping and holding small groups online.
- **Good Communication:** Clear, complete, and timely communication will be essential.

Core Practices:

- **Reopening Task Force:** Your church is encouraged to form a Reopening Task Force to oversee and coordinate your reopening plan. This could include your pastor, members of your church council, trustees, SPPRC, lay leadership, and any laity who are medical professionals. Hold a phone or online meeting to review your plan, decide which steps you will take, and who will be assigned to which tasks.
- **Preparing Church Building / Worship Space for Reopening**
 - **Closing Off Unneeded Spaces:** In advance of deep cleaning your facility, consider creating a cleaning and storage/close-off plan for each room. Communicate this plan of deep cleaning to your custodian and/or cleaning team, so everyone knows what to do where.
 - Deep-cleaning surfaces before and after gatherings:

- The CDC has compiled an excellent page with advice on cleaning and disinfecting your facility. Please read it and plan as to how your custodian and/or a team of people can deep clean your church based on these guidelines: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>
- Please use EPA approved disinfectants that are known to kill COVID-19: <https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2>
- Shampoo carpeting where possible.
- Follow CDC guidelines for cleaning fabric surfaces such as upholstery.
- In addition to the surfaces that the CDC mentions, consider Sunday School rooms, nurseries, drinking fountains, the backs of pews, chancel furniture, microphones, lecterns and pulpits, acolyte equipment, collection plates, organ/piano keyboards, choir folders, hymnals, sound boards, and other sundry locations and items.
- Some of these items will likely be cleaned and stored, or locations will be cleaned and closed off, until a vaccine becomes available and social distancing can be discontinued.
 - Remove Bibles, hymnals, pens, information cards, etc. from the backs of chairs/pews and store them.
 - Remove unnecessary furniture and items from rooms to be used, such as tables, chairs, toys.
 - Close off rooms that are not being used: Sunday school rooms, meeting rooms, choir rooms, etc.
- Cleaning of surfaces will need to occur weekly after people have been in the building. Deep cleaning should be considered on a monthly basis until a vaccine becomes available.
- Communication about cleanliness: Spread the word about how you've prepared the church for their arrival via website, email, social media, and even notes on the doors of the building.
 - Be sure to use the words "clean, safe, and mindful of health needs and issues in preparation for a non-touch experience" or something similar.
 - Consider taping off sections of the sanctuary designating 6-foot distance separations in seating to guide your members to safe seating practices.
 - Remind your staff and membership that if they are experiencing any symptoms, they should stay home, seek medical advice from their primary care physician, and follow isolation protocols.
- **Preparing for people to gather for worship**
 - The most important church reopening principle is you must, as much as possible, limit exposure to droplets in the air which could contain the COVID-19 virus. Therefore, social distancing measures must be followed.
 - The virus is spread through droplets that come into the air from breathing, sneezing, coughing, and singing. Religious ceremonies, as they take place in relatively enclosed spaces where many people are present for longer than 10 minutes, are at particular risk for spreading the virus to large groups of people. This is an excellent guide to how the virus is spread and why social distancing measures are necessary. <https://www.erinbromag.com/post/the-risks-know-them-avoid-them>
 - Part of Christian fellowship is lovingly setting certain traditions aside for a short period of time in order to ensure that everyone remains healthy. As Ecclesiastes 3:5 reminds us, there is a time to refrain from embracing. Encourage church members to express their love and fellowship with non-touch alternatives, such as prayer hands with a bow or waving.
 - It is difficult to say that we should discourage in-person fellowship prior to and after the service; it's part of the lifeblood of a church community. To echo the refrain of Ecclesiastes once more,

there is a season for everything. Let this be the season where we communicate our love through phone conversations, email messages, first class mail, and video conferencing so we will be 'yet alive, and see each other's face' when a vaccine becomes available.

- Everyone present during the worship service must wear a mask, even the pastors. Use microphones, increased voice volume, or projecting the sermon text on a projector to overcome muffling that might be caused by the mask. If members do not have masks or cannot afford one, arrange for another member of the congregation to drop off a mask prior to attending service at that member's house.
- Building occupancy limits will be set by County Board of Health. By law, these guidelines must be followed. Consider offering more than one worship service depending on how many people are allowed to be gathered into one place. Communicate any plans for multiple services to members in advance so that they can plan for which service they attend.
- Wherever possible, have hand sanitizer available in visible locations throughout the publicly used parts of the church.
- Remind members to be thorough in personal hygiene such as handwashing.
- High Risk Members
 - Anyone who does not feel comfortable attending in person should continue to shelter in place and engage with online services. The church leadership should be sure to keep in touch with these members until it is safe for them to come back to in-person worship.
 - It is recommended that people who are immunocompromised to continue to shelter in place and engage with online services.
 - Prayerfully consider not bringing children who are too young or people with special needs who can't be expected to wear a mask for the full length of the service to church. Children can also become infected with COVID-19 and are frequently vectors for spreading the disease. Consider instead having small children record a video to be shared with the congregation and have them continue to watch online.
 - People who work in essential services, such as health care, may want to continue to shelter in place and engage with online services depending on the level of contact they have with the general public.
 - People who work in skilled nursing facilities, prisons, or meatpacking facilities are strongly encouraged to shelter in place and engage with online services due to the high rates of transmission within these facilities.
- Preparing for a worship service
 - Continue Online Worship:
 - It is recommended to continue to offer online worship even if you resume worship in person, so that those at a distance, who are ill, or who must continue to shelter in place, can be connected to the church.
 - If your church leadership wishes to continue online worship only at this time, perceiving the risk of reopening too great, **it is okay**. Do not feel pressured to open if you are not comfortable doing so.
 - In-Person Worship Guidelines:
 - **Greeters:** Your greeters are your first line of helpers in this brave new world. As members enter the building, have the greeters wave and point out stations for hand sanitizers, offer masks if someone needs it, show designated seating safety, explain worship protocols regarding passing the peace, singing, and offering, and anything else that may be specific to your church.
 - **Social distancing:** Encourage members to sit at least 6 feet apart from each other throughout the service. Families may sit together. If you wish to use tape to designate safe distances, this

may be helpful. Remind people to wave or bow with prayer hands rather than giving hugs or handshakes, especially during the passing of the peace and after the service.

- **Bulletins:** The use of bulletins is strongly discouraged at this time. If people are able to print advance copies for themselves from an email sent prior to service, they may bring them as long as they don't give them to anyone else. Wherever possible, use a projector to project the service information onto a screen or wall.
- **Singing:** It is heartbreaking to consider that we will have to discontinue singing at this time; the risk of spreading COVID-19 with singing is quite high. However, let us perhaps hum along to the organ, piano, guitar, or video that is playing and look forward to the joyful noise we will make when a vaccine becomes available!
- **Offering:** Passing a common offering plate increases the chance of virus spread. If worshippers bring their offerings to church, direct them to place their gift in a designated basket. Encourage people to continue to give online giving or through the mail rather than gathering them during worship.
- **Coffee Hour:** There should be no coffee hour until a vaccine becomes available. The chance of transmission through socializing and removing masks to eat/drink is too great.
- **Baptism:** Prayerfully consider whether you wish to have the baptism of babies and children too young to wear a mask in the presence of the congregation at this time. Children can be vectors for spreading the disease. Additionally, the presence of many additional family members in the service raises the risk of transmission. Plan with the family in advance how you will conduct such a service and decide whether it may be possible to have the service online for the main congregation to watch while the family alone is present for the baptism.
 - Pastor: sanitize before and after the baptism.
 - Water for baptism: boil water before and after use.
 - If more than one person is being baptized at the same time, have separate amounts of water available for each person.
- **Communion:** Another difficult question that pastors and congregations are facing is the question of whether to continue offering the sacrament of communion, and how to do so safely. Communion is one of the places where we receive the grace of God in community with one another, so choosing to forgo it, even temporarily, feels painful and difficult. If you wish to offer communion, please do the following in preparation:
 - All preparation of the bread and cup should be handled with clean, gloved hands.
 - Communion servers should openly wash or sanitize their hands in front of the congregation and put on disposable gloves during distribution of the bread and cup.
 - Wash any and all sacramental plates, cups, and linens each time they are used. Disposable communion cups should be thrown out, not reused. Clean altar or table surfaces. Dispose of any plastic used to cover communion elements each time it is used. Discontinue the practice of common cup drinking or intinction until the epidemic is past.
 - Here are some options for distribution of the bread and cup:
 - Option 1:
 - Walk your members through the process prior to receiving the bread and cup.
 - Remind them to stand 6 feet apart when waiting to receive.
 - Have them hand sanitizer prior to receiving.
 - Remind them to replace their mask as soon as they are done taking the bread and the cup.

Plan for how you will communicate your plans:

- Clear, concise and often
- Identify different audiences
 - Digitals
 - Non-digital; telephone calls, first class mail
- Signage throughout building telling:
 - What you are doing to keep everyone safe
 - What is expected of anyone in the building
 - How to get help if needed

Encourage people to expect updates, revisions, corrections and changes.

- Regular updates

Resources:

http://cdn.cnn.com/cnn/2020/images/04/30/reopening_guidelines.pdf

[National coronavirus response: A road map to reopening](#)

[Guidelines for Opening Up America Again](#)

[COVID19 Conversation Guide for Reopening a Church Campus](#)

[Basic Guide for Returning to Your Building after COVID-19 Church](#)

[24 Questions Your Church Should Answer Before People Return](#)

[Returning to Church](#)

[Community and Faith-Based Organizations | COVID-19](#)

[Implementing Safety Practices for Critical Infrastructure Workers Who May Have Had Exposure to a Person with Suspected or Confirmed COVID-19](#)