

Returning to Public Worship

Theological and Practical Considerations

This resource seeks to provide theological and practical guidance for congregations and leaders as they make faithful and responsible decisions about the church's worship in the wake of the Covid-19 global pandemic. It does not presume to offer medical or legal advice; congregations and leaders should consult with local authorities, staying up to date with the latest guidance from public health and government officials. This resource includes the following elements:

- a pastoral statement on reentry to public life and worship;
- a provisional timeline for resuming public worship;
- general considerations for returning to public worship;
- specific guidelines organized around the order of worship; and
- links to additional resources that may be of interest.

Pastoral Statement

The following pastoral statement on the church's reentry to public life and worship may be used or adapted in public worship, church newsletters, email messages, or on social media.

"When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place" (Acts 2:1). So begins the account of the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church in the book of Acts. As we approach the day of Pentecost in the year 2020, we understand that it may not be possible for the members of our congregation to be "all together in one place" this year. While some restrictions are being lifted in some places and for some people, the ongoing threat of the Covid-19 global pandemic will require that we return to church in a way that is measured and mindful of the needs of the most vulnerable among us. While some may begin to attend public worship in person, we know that some will need to continue to worship at home for some time.

We give thanks, then, for the promise of our faith—that the Lord God will bless and keep us, the risen Christ is with us, and the Holy Spirit connects us with believers near and far. We take comfort and inspiration from the example of the earliest believers, who "spent much time together in the temple" *and* "broke bread at home ... with glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:46). As we anxiously track the news in these times—with numbers of new cases, numbers of persons who have died, and numbers of those who are recovering—we remember the good news of the gospel: "And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).

As this congregation begins to resume public activities, please know that we will do so through a careful process of discussion and discernment, with an abundance of caution and concern for those who are most vulnerable, upon consideration of the best scientific knowledge at our disposal, in the spirit of constant prayer, and with full trust in the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

We may make mistakes along the way. There will surely be awkward moments as we adjust to new protocols and practices. There will be times of frustration, disappointment, and grief. We will have countless opportunities to exercise the spiritual gifts of patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control.

But there will also be blessings. There will be wonderful surprises, great celebrations, and moments of deep satisfaction. We will get to see glimpses of the new thing God is doing, even now. We will have opportunities to savor the spiritual gifts of love, joy, peace, generosity, and faithfulness.

Let us be faithful, then—to God and to one another—as we receive the gifts and work through the challenges of this time in the life of our congregation and world. Let us be guided by the Word, responsive to the Spirit, and open to the grace of God. Let us remember that nothing can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus.

Provisional Timeline: Contingent on Local Conditions and Latest Developments

This provisional timeline for resuming public worship is based on a number of other publicly available documents and proposals. It does not constitute medical or legal advice; rather, it seeks to outline some of the steps congregations might consider as—in careful coordination with government authorities and medical experts—they begin to resume in-person services.

Please note: the language of “stages” (instead of “phases”) is used intentionally so as not to suggest equivalency with particular phases of government guidelines. Local presbyteries and sessions should make their own determinations based on all of the available evidence.

Preparation (Before Stage One)

- Maintain regular communication with members
- Set realistic expectations for a gradual return to public worship
- Continue online worship (if applicable) with leaders at home
- Encourage members to adopt practices of daily prayer at home

Stage One

- Church activities are restricted to ten persons or fewer
- Continue online worship (if applicable) with leaders at church
- Ask members to procure masks; leaders procure face shields
- Prepare for increased sanitation/cleaning and hygiene measures at church
- Encourage members to continue practices of daily prayer at home

Stage Two

- Church activities are restricted to fifty persons or fewer
- Institute increased sanitation/cleaning and hygiene measures at church
- Resume public worship with some members, under age 65, no underlying conditions
- Continue online worship (if applicable) for those who remain at home
- Consider other in-person leadership if leaders are over 65, have underlying conditions
- Maintain physical distancing in worship (at least six feet, excluding households)
- Close common areas (fellowship halls, church offices, coffee spaces)
- Refrain from communion, handshakes, passing offering plates, and printed bulletins
- Worshipers wear masks at all times; leaders may wear clear face shields
- Encourage members to continue practices of daily prayer at home

Stage Three

- Church activities are open to more than fifty persons
- Maintain increased sanitation/cleaning and hygiene measures at church
- Resume public worship with other members (insofar as they feel comfortable doing so)
- Continue online worship (if applicable) for homebound and hospitalized members
- Resume communion, etc. with additional precautionary measures (see below)
- Physical distancing may be relaxed and masks may become optional in some places
- Encourage members to continue practices of daily prayer at home

General Considerations

Increased Hygiene

Keeping the church clean and safe is part of our stewardship for the gifts of God and our care for the body of Christ. Honor those who carry out this important ministry with abundant gratitude and, if employees of the church, fair compensation for their additional efforts.

- Rearrange gathering, passage, and seating spaces in a way that allows for physical distancing to continue (although households may group more closely together).
- Provide hand sanitizer and/or hand-washing stations in convenient, accessible places.
- Clean high-touch surfaces regularly and frequently, after each service of worship or other public event.

Physical Distancing

When Moses encounters the Lord at the burning bush, a voice from the flames commands him: “Come no closer!” (Exod. 3:5). Keeping a safe distance will be an important part of how we approach God and one another as we return to public worship.

- Advise worshipers to maintain a physical distance of six feet or more as long as these guidelines are in effect.
- Rearrange gathering, passage, and seating spaces in a way that will facilitate physical distancing and reduce crowding.
- Provide additional time for gathering and sending so people can do so in a way that minimizes close contact.

What to Wear

“Above all, clothe yourselves in love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col. 3:14). Leaders in the early church used the baptismal imagery of being clothed in a new garment—the righteousness of Christ—as a metaphor for Christian life.

- Worshipers will likely need to wear masks as public gatherings resume; encourage worshipers to bring their own masks (following specifications) and have a sanitary supply of additional masks on hand for those who may need one.
- Worship leaders may need to wear masks when not speaking or singing; a protective hat or face shield can reduce the risk of contagion by blocking airborne agents of infection.

Communication

Over and over, the scriptures demonstrate the creative and redemptive power of God’s Word. As those called to proclaim God’s life-giving Word, we must use our words in ways that honor and preserve life and communicate God’s love for all.

- Use email, websites, and social media to communicate expectations for those who may plan to attend worship (staying home if sick, physical distancing, washing hands, wearing masks, etc.).

- Ask people not to attend public worship if they are feeling ill, think they may have been exposed to the coronavirus, have compromised immune systems, or are at high risk of exposing others.
- Provide clear signage describing church policies and best practices for hygiene.

Reconnecting, Catching Up

The vitality of the church depends on connection and relationship among the members of the body of Christ. However necessary for the preserving the life and health of the church's members, this time of distancing and isolation has also taken a toll on the ties that bind us together. It will be important for leaders and members to tend to these networks of relationships as we emerge from pandemic restrictions. Remember that this time will have been more difficult for some and be intentional about reaching out to those members.

- Be careful to announce plans for a return to worship and other public activities in a way that does not exclude those who must continue to worship at home.
- Use technology in a way that helps homebound or hospitalized members feel like active participants, rather than passive observers.
- Review the church's membership rolls and designate leaders or teams to check in on members in ways that are safe and appropriate.
- Organize small groups within the congregation according to neighborhood, age, interest, etc., and provide them with ideas or instructions for staying in touch online or in person.
- Make extra efforts to connect with those who live alone, have suffered loss and grief, are less comfortable with technology, or struggle with mental health concerns.

Provisional Practices, Fresh Insights, and New Habits

The emergency nature of the pandemic has led to a time for experimentation in many communities of faith. There will be some practices that may have been appropriate for a time, but now need to be reconsidered, revised, or relinquished. In the midst of these difficult conversations and decisions, there may be the need to suspend judgment and extend grace. Don't jump to conclusions or be too quick to condemn.

At the same time, there will be other things we have learned that we want to continue, adapt, or even expand as we return from this time of wilderness or exile. Don't forget these important insights—they may be signs of a new thing God is doing among us.

As congregations and members return to familiar patterns of life and worship—or establish new ones in response to changed circumstances—it will be important to think carefully about who we are called to be “on the other side of this.” This time of reentry presents a chance to nurture new habits of Christian faith, life, and worship. Don't miss the opportunity for intentional reflection and deliberate action.

The Order of Worship

Beginning to Gather in Person

The assembly of the people of God as the body of Christ is a sign of the church's witness to the resurrection, a vital sign of life for the world. Particularly at the conclusion of a time of death and distancing, it is important for the church to reassert this witness in a way that is can be a compelling affirmation of faith while, at the same time, being careful to safeguard the life and health of the most vulnerable among us. As much as we might wish to have a large event or grand celebration to mark the return to public worship, it is likely that considerations of public health will necessitate a more gradual process of reunion.

- Offer additional times for worship in order to accommodate multiple small groups, rather than a single larger assembly.
- Consider alternate locations for worship, including larger rooms in the church or exterior spaces such as parks, lawns, gardens, or parking lots (weather permitting).
- You may wish to begin the return to public worship with smaller (ten persons or fewer), neighborhood-based gatherings, using resources for daily prayer (these are designed in such a way that they can be led by any member of the congregation).
- Encourage those who are older, medically vulnerable, or in high-risk vocations to continue worshipping from home, returning only when they feel it is safe to do so.

Congregational Song

In Christian worship we join generations of the people of God, the global church, and even the heavenly host in giving glory to God. One of the primary expressions of this praise is through congregational song. As the final phrase of the Psalms puts it: "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!" (Ps. 150:6). Tragically, the Covid-19 coronavirus attacks the breath and transmits itself through respiration when people are gathered in close proximity. This makes congregational singing an especially poignant and problematic activity. How can we continue to sing and make music to the Lord at this time?

- Provide as much physical distance as possible in the sanctuary and chancel so worshipers are less likely to come in contact with airborne pathogens.
- When or where congregational singing is not advisable, find other ways for worshipers to participate in musical offerings, clapping or moving in rhythm, for instance, or using small percussion instruments.
- Feature hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs from soloists or small ensembles, with the congregation praying through listening attentively.
- Use this opportunity to teach and learn new songs from the hymnal or other sources; have a song of the week or month and invite worshipers to sing it at home.
- Encourage members to order hymnals to keep and use at home, especially if they must continue to worship at home for some time.

- If someone in your community knows American Sign Language, teach simple phrases (“Alleluia,” “Lord, have mercy,” “Amen”) that might be used as responses in songs, as well as other acts of worship, such as affirmations of faith.

Confession and Lament

The psalms teach us to bring our whole lives to God in prayer—even our sin, shame, and suffering. As the pandemic comes to a conclusion, there will be a need to lament the losses, injustices, and frustrations of this time, including the sickness and death of loved ones, missed opportunities, financial setbacks, and separation from family and friends. There will also be a need to confess personal and social sin, including systems and patterns of privilege that make some more vulnerable to the virus and its economic impact. Our confession and lament are always framed by grace—beginning with God’s initiative and pointing to God’s mercy.

- Use the biblical psalms as models or patterns for confession and lament, expanding the church’s repertoire of prayer in this time of crisis.
- Allow times for silent or spoken prayers of confession or lament, in addition to composed unison prayers or responsive readings.
- Find options for prayers of confession and lament in the 2018 *Book of Common Worship* (pp. 56–63, 578–9, 582–6, 600–1, 605–12).

Proclaiming the Gospel

The promise of the gospel is freedom from death, forgiveness of sin, and fullness of life in Jesus Christ. The church and the world need to hear and remember this good news, now more than ever. Be bold in your proclamation that nothing in life or death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Indeed, this is the challenge of the gospel—to share this good news with all, proclaiming the reign of God in word and action.

- Connect biblical stories with events in the life of the world and (with permission) the experiences of members of the community in the midst of the pandemic. Show how the good news speaks to current events and situations.
- Make space for personal testimony in worship, inviting (and preparing or equipping) persons to bear witness to the gifts and challenges of the gospel at this time.
- Suggest ways in which worshipers can testify to the good news of Jesus through their words and actions in everyday life, even when face-to-face contact is limited.

Building Up the Body

Even through the time of pandemic, God has continued “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12), providing and preparing persons for discipleship and service in Jesus’ name. Through the sacrament of Baptism, new members are welcomed into the body of Christ and community of faith, beginning the lifelong journey of discipleship that is each Christian’s vocation. Through ordination, members of the body are set apart for certain forms of service and empowered with the gifts of the Spirit to carry out

these ministries. When it is safe and appropriate for a portion of the congregation to gather, it will be important to celebrate these events in public worship.

- When baptism must be delayed, catechumenal preparation for baptism (whether for new believers or for the parents of young children) may continue through online resources and conversations.
- Similarly, when ordination is delayed, candidates for ordered ministries may be equipped and prepared for their calling through training and mentoring programs of the session (for deacons and ruling elders) or presbytery (for teaching elders).
- When baptisms and ordinations must take place in the context of a smaller subset of the congregation for reasons of public health and safety, find ways for the larger church to bear witness to the event, show their support, and offer their prayer and welcome.

Weddings and Funerals

Weddings and funerals, as important passages in human life, are ripples of our baptismal life together in the body of Christ. The promises that we make in Christian marriage are rooted in the vows of our baptismal covenant and sustained by the steadfast love and faithfulness of God. The Christian funeral is said to mark the “completion of our baptism,” as this service of witness to the resurrection is a culmination of the baptismal pattern of dying and rising in Christ (see Rom. 6:3–11). As long as physical distancing guidelines are in place, weddings and funerals are likely to be smaller gatherings, attended by a handful of loved ones. At such a time, it is all the more important to teach about the baptismal connections of these events, recognize them in the public and online worship of the community of the baptized, and surround them with the prayers of the faithful.

- Keep a careful record of smaller weddings and funerals so they may be celebrated and remembered when it safe to hold larger gatherings, perhaps on the first anniversary of an event or at combined services.
- The “marriage” element of the wedding service—vows, exchange of symbols, prayers, announcement, and peace—might be excerpted as smaller rite for close friends and/or family when it is not possible to hold a larger gathering.
- Similarly, the “committal” element of the funeral liturgy may be used as a standalone service with a small gathering of loved ones, holding the full service of witness to the resurrection when it is safe and appropriate for a larger gathering of the community.
- When the church gathers in person and/or online on the Sunday following a wedding or funeral, acknowledge these events between the sermon and the prayers of intercession (see W-3.0307), then mention them among the petitions that follow.
- Find options for weddings (pp. 687–728) and funerals (pp. 769–824) in the 2018 *Book of Common Worship*, including the reaffirmation of marriage vows (pp. 708–10), the committal (pp. 795–8), and a service for comforting the bereaved (pp. 778–9).

Prayers of Intercession

As a “royal priesthood” (Exod. 19:6; 1 Pet. 2:9), the people of God are called to join Christ’s intercession for the world God loves. As members begin to return to church (or continue

worshiping at home), they will come with the deep concerns that have emerged in this time of crisis. These concerns are offered to God as prayers of intercession—for the church (local and global), the healing of creation, nations and people, local communities, those who have suffered great loss, and commemorations of those who have died. We seek salvation for others but also transformation for ourselves and our communities, “so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16).

- Invite members to take up a daily practice of intercession, keeping a list of needs or concerns on their hearts and remembering them in prayer once or twice a day and/or bringing them to worship on the Lord’s Day.
- Make a practice of commemorating particular persons who have died (whether from Covid-19 or other causes) and praying for those who have loved them.
- Find options for prayers of intercession and commemoration in the 2018 *Book of Common Worship* (pp. 92–117, 564–5, 586–8, 597, 614–23, 834–855, 874–95, 1120–3).

Sharing the Peace

One of the primary biblical sources for the church’s liturgical practice of passing the peace is found in the Gospel of John, where the risen Christ comes to fearful disciples, says “Peace be with you,” breathes upon them (!) with the gift of the Holy Spirit, and commissions them to the work of forgiveness and reconciliation (John 20:19–23). We learn from this story that Christ’s peace is more than a friendly greeting among friends—it is an invitation to bold discipleship in the midst of division, challenging us to extend God’s call to reconciliation to a “broken and fearful world” (A Brief Statement of Faith).

- For those in public worship, find ways to share Christ’s peace without touch and while maintaining safe distances—through the exchange of words, with a bow, by smiling with one’s eyes (since mouths may be covered by masks), or using American Sign Language.
- For those who are worshiping at home, find ways to share Christ’s peace across the distance—through text messages, social media posts, voice messages, or post cards.
- Find options for the peace in the 2018 *Book of Common Worship* (pp. 67–8, 117–8).

Offering Our Gifts

Every service of Christian worship is an opportunity for self-offering, a sign of our gratitude for God’s own self-offering in Jesus Christ. With the additional financial pressures and hardships of this time—both personal and institutional—it is all the more important to share our gifts, be good stewards of God’s resources, and help those in need. Consider the example of the earliest Christians, who “had all things in common [and] would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44–45). Or consider the ministry of Jesus, who found ways to feed multitudes with a few simple gifts.

- In addition to regular tithes and offerings, provide direct assistance to those who have been most acutely impacted by the financial implications of the pandemic.

- Develop and promote opportunities for electronic contributions, particularly for the sake of those who are worshipping at home or joining the congregation's worship from a distance through online services.
- Offer suggestions for how members might use their time and talents for the benefit of those who are struggling with illness, isolation, or loss of income.

The Joyful Feast

The Eucharist or Lord's Supper is, among other things, an eschatological banquet of thanksgiving for God's saving works, God's victory over death (Isa. 25, Rev. 7). It is a communal meal of the covenant people of God, gathered as the living body of the risen Christ. It is part of our ongoing participation in the dying and rising of our Savior Jesus as we await his glorious return and the consummation of his holy reign. It is our regular nourishment in the grace of Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Spirit. How can we remember and celebrate the many facets of this joyful feast as we return to worship, while being careful to preserve the health of each member of Christ's body?

- Watching the pastor receive the bread and cup is not a substitute for participation in the sacrament. If it is deemed unsafe for members of the church to receive as one body, it is better to refrain from celebrating the sacrament until such a time as this is possible.
- When it is safe and appropriate to do so, conduct the service of communion in a way that allows for physical distancing and reduces close contact. It is recommended that leaders invite worshipers to come forward individually or in household groups, rather than passing elements through the congregation. Serving across the communion table may provide a way to reinforce physical distancing. Designate servers to go to those who are unable to come forward, still maintaining as much physical distance as possible.
- "Eucharist" means "thanksgiving." Make room in the eucharistic liturgy to give thanks for health care providers, emergency personnel, service-industry workers, teachers, public safety officers, and others who have offered Christ's compassion, wisdom, healing, and service in this time of pandemic.
- Ask servers to sanitize their hands immediately before distributing the elements; doing so in view of the congregation may help in reducing anxiety.
- Use pre-cut bread. Let the bread be given by the server, with worshipers receiving it in open, outstretched hands, rather than worshipers taking the bread for themselves with multiple hands in the plate or basket.
- Use small cups of wine or juice, spread out around the service tray so worshipers may take one without touching another. Provide a basket or table at the side(s) of the sanctuary where worshipers may leave their cups after drinking.
- Encourage people to take their time and exercise patience throughout the service of communion. Reassure worshipers that they may also refrain from receiving communion in good conscience and without judgment.
- Take advantage of the provision for the extended serving of the communion of the church (*Book of Order*, W-3.0414) as a way to bridge between public worship and

homebound or hospitalized members, insofar as it is safe and appropriate to do so. This practice may be carried out by teams of deacons and/or ruling elders.

- Find options for eucharistic prayers in the 2018 *Book of Common Worship* (pp. 25–9, 42–51, 118–49, 163–400, and elsewhere).

Sending in Service

The final movement of the Service for the Lord’s Day is our movement into the world. This is true whether we are praising God in the church’s sanctuary or praying at home as we shelter in place. We are called to continue our worship and service of God in outward mission, authentic evangelism, and daily discipleship. We are sent to practice our faith, live in hope, and show Christ’s love.

- Think creatively about how to make our faith, life, and worship public and visible a time of physical distance, isolation, and fear. Use your voice, actions, presence—through social media, yard signs, fund raising, charitable giving, works of compassion, care packages for the homebound, messages to neighbors, calls to congress, and so on—to bear witness to “the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15) in Jesus Christ.
- Post words from a common blessing (Num. 6:24–26; Ps. 121:8; or 2 Cor. 13:13) and/or charge (Mic. 6:8; Rom. 12:9–18; or Col. 3:12–17) near the door of the church or home.

Additional Resources

Links to Other Resources

- [Coronavirus/Covid-19 Resources](#) from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
- Recommendations for [Returning to Church](#) from the Wisconsin Council of Churches
- Guidance and resources for the [Extended Serving of Communion](#) (see W-3.0414)
- Covid-19 Quicksheets from the PC(USA) [Office of Christian Formation](#)