



Stepping forward safely in love and trust

A new framework for our Greater Northwest Area approach to COVID-19

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Introduction to the New Framework

After deep prayer and consultation with the COVID-19 Response Team, we recognize that it is time to entrust local leaders with more responsibility for determining COVID-19 health and safety measures appropriate and adapted to their specific circumstances. It is hard to understate the disruption that COVID-19 has had upon our lives and ministries.

On March 15, 2020, we made a swift, decisive action to close our United Methodist facilities and discontinue in-person gatherings. Since then, the Greater Northwest Area has moved cautiously toward returning to in-person activities. At the same time, local churches and ministries have been bold in moving worship, bible studies and other meetings online, experimenting with ministry in outdoor settings, and finding creative ways to serve their communities.

Throughout this time, leadership in the Greater Northwest Area has met regularly to consider many questions raised by faithful United Methodists doing their best to do no harm and by the emerging scientific knowledge about this disease and how it spreads.

Prayerfully, we have offered guidance, understanding that we are in this together and that the lack of reliable information we had about COVID-19 was matched by the diversity of opinions about what should be done. We had faith that our work would give local churches and ministry leaders some freedom to make adaptations necessary to keep people safe, as we wrestled with competing values and changing “facts” on their behalf.

Much has changed over the past year. The Greater Northwest Area remains as committed as always to doing no harm, doing good, and staying in love with God. We recognize that COVID-19 is still present in our communities, variants are spreading in some areas, and this is not the time to let our guard down. However, we also appreciate that vaccines are proving to be highly effective and becoming widely available to persons 16 and older and may soon be approved for younger children. Clergy and lay leaders in local ministry settings have learned a great deal about keeping people safe from the virus.

We have also been listening deeply to the questions and concerns raised by United Methodists across our area. While there is still appreciation for our careful work, there is also a growing readiness among some local leaders to take on more responsibility for the many decisions that need to be made as circumstances continue to change. Paired with our understanding that no two ministries are alike, we recognize a need for a new framework moving forward. As a result, we are now shifting significant responsibility for guiding COVID-19 response from conference and area leadership **to the local level**.

This shift is rooted in our trust in local leaders and acknowledging the unprecedented and extraordinary faithfulness demonstrated through a prolonged period of crisis—even through exhaustion, frustration, and endless challenges. Ministry has continued! Faith has deepened! Lives have been transformed in wonderful ways!

On May 17, all churches and ministries across the Greater Northwest Area will leave behind the phased approach of *Reimagining Life Together*, which has guided our shared efforts to this point. All churches and other ministries in the Greater Northwest Area (Alaska, Oregon-Idaho and Pacific Northwest Conferences) are asked to either follow a set of **Basic Standard Practices** developed by the COVID-19 Response Team or to develop their own, customized, **Local Practices**, based upon guidance that follows.

Option 1: Basic Standard Practices are uniform for churches choosing this option, based upon the best, careful guidance offered by the CDC, public health officials and other experts.

Option 2: Local Practices offer more local control and responsibility for how best, in a specific place with its particular building, people, risk, weather, etc., to carry out ministry while protecting the health and safety of the people that God has entrusted to the church's care.

Plans for the local option are developed and approved by local leaders, following the guidance provided. They do not need to be approved by district superintendents or directors of connectional ministries before being put into action.

Still, you are not alone. With both options, the COVID-19 Response Team and your district superintendents and directors of connectional ministries continue to be available to you to answer questions, make recommendations, offer resources and suggest best practices.

Over time, these new area practices may need to be adjusted if conditions across the Greater Northwest Area change dramatically. We will strive to keep them within CDC regulations and responsive to a fair assessment of what is safe and practical for most local churches and ministries.

As you consider this possibility and how you might live into it, please remember Saint Paul's admonition that what is "permissible" is not always "beneficial" to the common good. (I Corinthians 10:23). While some churches may act quickly to adopt new, less restrictive practices, **it is always OK for a church or ministry to choose to remain more cautious for any reason.**

Despite these changes, I continue to expect and trust every local church and ministry to do the careful, deliberate, ongoing work necessary to keep their communities safe. At a minimum, no United Methodist church or ministry should operate beyond what is permitted within your state and local public health guidelines, nor take advantage of special exemptions that are granted to religious communities but not based upon health and scientific evidence. In all that we do, we remain accountable to each other, and as importantly, to the neighbors God gives us to care for.

In love and trust,



Bishop Elaine JW Stanovsky

Congregational Singing

An urgent question is, "When will congregations be able to sing indoors?" Singing is a precious source of praise, mourning, spiritual encouragement and community solidarity in a faith community. Many yearn for the sound of voices raised in unison or harmony in worship or fellowship. I understand this and join you in your desire to sing together once again.

The COVID-19 Team and I find ourselves caught between the spiritual hunger for congregational singing and the clear evidence that this is one of the most dangerous activities for the spread of the deadly coronavirus. We are confident that **indoor congregational singing is not safe at this time.** Please read the appendix to this document on congregational singing for more information.

Therefore, **I strongly urge and appeal to you to continue to find alternative ways to worship and enjoy music until it is safe to sing indoors again together.**

Two Options for Ministry during COVID-19

The Greater Northwest Area of The United Methodist Church
Effective May 17, 2021 | Developed by the COVID-19 Response Team

Every United Methodist church or other ministry is responsible for protecting its staff, volunteers, members, and participants from harm as it plans and conducts in-person gatherings and activities. Indoor congregational singing is not safe at this time and is not allowed until further notice.

Each church and ministry will choose whether to follow a set of **Basic Standard Practices** delineated here, or to develop its own **Local Practices**, adhering to the guidance that follows.

Option 1: Basic Standard Practices for Churches and other Ministries

United Methodist churches or other ministries choosing to follow the Basic Standard Practices are responsible for observing the following guidelines in their life and ministry.

- **Every local church and ministry will take care to maintain reasonable compliance to these area standards.** Each should have a team that meets to:
 - Discuss and assess the church or ministry capacity to safely meet in-person
 - Consider how to adapt to changes in public health requirements
 - Evaluate all gatherings and spaces for safe use with 6' distancing between households and good ventilation
 - Plan how to sustain digital options for participation, especially for vulnerable persons, who may not be available to meet in-person
 - Prepare communication with members, constituents, and the public
- **A local church is not permitted to hold in-person worship without the approval of the pastor.** For local churches, decisions about the use of church property for worship or other gatherings belong to the pastor without interference from the Board of Trustees (*Book of Discipline*, ¶ 2533).
- **Indoor gatherings** (including worship, small groups, meetings, outside groups, and youth activities – middle school/jr. high and older) **are permitted with up to 50 people**, as allowed by state and local restrictions: with 6' of physical distancing between households.
 - Masks always required by all participants
 - Solo or household vocal and wind instrument performances may be recorded indoors following Guidelines for Safe Singing ([see appendix](#))
 - No congregational singing at this time
 - Events should be limited in length to no more than one hour
- **Outdoor worship/gatherings of any size are permitted;** 6' of physical distancing is required between households.



- Masks always required by all participants
- Singing allowed following Guidelines for Safe Singing ([see appendix](#))
- Ministries should explore local government permitting requirements for outdoor events, particularly if using amplification or radio frequencies
- **Recognizing the essential nature of the sacraments to congregational life**, and the inherent risks posed by each during a pandemic, follow the guidance outlined in each of the following documents.
 - **Communion:** Continue to follow the guidance offered in '[Options for practicing Holy Communion during a pandemic](#).'
 - **Baptism:** Follow the guidance offered in '[Resuming Care-filled Worship and Sacramental Life During a Pandemic](#),' beginning on page 23.
- **Foodservice, coffee hours or potlucks** require commitment to the Safe Local Practices option ([Option 2](#)).
- **Childcare, Sunday School, or children's church** require commitment to the Safe Local Practices option ([Option 2](#)).

Option 2: A Commitment to Safe Local Practices for Churches and other Ministries

More local contextualization and responsibility

Churches and ministries choosing to take on responsibility for developing localized practices outside the Basic Standard Practices may do so upon obtaining signatures of ministry leaders and district superintendent or director of connectional ministries on the following commitment letter.

As leaders of _____, we accept the responsibility to carefully study, plan and implement safe local practices for our church/ministry outside the basic standard practices shared across the Greater Northwest Area, but consistent with the CDC and governmental guidance. We understand that we are still responsible to plan within the parameters defined below, in dialogue with our district superintendent or director of connectional ministries as questions or concerns emerge.

Additional Commitments

- **We affirm that as followers of Jesus, we are responsible** for living our lives and conducting our ministries with care for the safety, health and well-being of ourselves and others.
- **We will monitor and follow the latest CDC guidance** (especially relating to [hygiene](#), [masking](#), and [distancing](#)), considering the risk factors they identify and take all reasonable steps to eliminate or mitigate those risks.
- **We will also work within parameters required by local and state governments** and those established by our accrediting/licensing bodies.
 - We will not use privileges accorded religious organizations to exempt ourselves from science-based restrictions applied to non-religious civic organizations of similar function.
- **We will follow the more cautious standards** in instances where CDC guidelines and local/state governments differ.
- **We will monitor and respond to changes in local risk**, regularly tracking data from [CovidActNow](#) and updates from state and local municipalities.
- **We will continue to offer accessible worship and meeting options**, as possible, for those who are vulnerable, not yet ready to return in person, or newly engaged through our virtual witness.
- **We will have a plan to clearly and positively communicate** with members, constituents, and the public our practices for reopening, and for stepping back as merited.
- **We will refrain from indoor congregational singing** until permitted by the Guidelines for Safe Singing ([see appendix](#)).

We, the undersigned, make these commitments as leaders in this work for our ministry setting.
(*Digital signatures are acceptable, continued on next page.*)

Pastoral/Executive Leader(s)

Additional signers – at least three relevant key leaders (e.g., board or council members, COVID-19 response team members)

As district superintendent/director of connectional ministries, I have received this commitment. I will continue to hold this ministry in prayer, offering my direct support in answering questions and providing resources to support their careful work of living into these commitments.

Signature of district superintendent or director of connectional ministries

Appendix: Guidelines for Safe Singing

Effective May 17, 2021 | Developed by the COVID-19 Response Team

If you were to ask the average United Methodist what they miss most about worship during this time of pandemic, many would point to the limitations upon music, particularly singing. The Bible is filled with numerous examples and encouragements to sing and give praise. Singing helps us connect with the Spirit and with each other in ways that can be hard to replicate.

At the same time, singing is one of the most problematic activities for a disease transmitted by aerosols. The risks outdoors with precautions are negligible. But indoors, especially with modest or inadequate air circulation, the risks become more concerning. If singing “a new song” to the Lord might do a sibling in Christ harm, surely, we must think twice!

We are confident that **indoor congregational singing is not safe at this time**. We are continually following the evolving science and anticipate extending permission for singing based on regional measures.

We encourage you to find alternative ways to worship and enjoy music until it is safe to sing indoors again together.

Options for safe singing vary depending on whether churches or ministries follow the **Basic Standard Practices** or **Commitment to Safe Local Practices**.

Basic Standard Practices for Churches and other Ministries

Indoors

- No congregational singing at this time.
- Solo or household vocal and wind instrument performances may be recorded with safety precautions, but not live performances.

Outdoors

- Congregational singing is allowed with strict 6' distancing between households and everyone masked.
- Music groups may gather for recording or performance. Strict 6' distancing between musicians, everyone masked (including singers and wind instruments).



Safe Local Practices for Churches and other Ministries

There may be ways to leverage careful practices and other resources to safely reintroduce more live singing, such as soloists and ensembles. We urge caution in this as several COVID-19 outbreaks have been linked to indoor singing in chorale and congregate settings. Please keep the following items in mind as you consider reintroducing singing in any form.

1. Singing creates far more aerosol production than any other form of speech, including forceful speaking like a pastor might do from the pulpit.
2. The more people with open mouths and the longer those mouths are open, the more aerosol will accumulate in a space. The more aerosol, the greater the risk of exposure.
3. The more ventilation in any space, the better. Screens and barriers make things worse as they disrupt airflow, allowing aerosols to accumulate in unpredictable ways. Outdoors, in an open-air area, is best.
4. Masks improve safety but do not eliminate risk. It is recommended that singers use singer's masks.¹
5. Face shields are [not recommended](#).²

As you do your careful research and study regarding soloist and ensembles, we recommend the following resources:

- The [Center for Congregational Song](#)
 - [Excerpts and recommendations](#) drawn from [NFHS Study](#) of aerosols released while singing and playing wind instruments
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) currently (as of April 27, 2021) recommends "[encourag\(ing\) guests to avoid singing or shouting, especially indoors.](#)"

1 A singer's mask offers the same protection as a regular mask but has increased depth to allow for wide open mouths without shifting the mask.

2 Face masks that are well-fitting and composed of at least two layers are best.

Quick Reference Guide

	We are following Option 1: Basic Standard Practices	We committed to Option 2: Safe Local Practices	What else?
CAN WE GATHER OUTDOORS?	YES No max. group size. Everyone masked. 6' distancing between households.	YES No max. group size. Everyone masked. 6' distancing between households.	Follow all local/state government limits on group size.
CAN WE GATHER INDOORS?	YES Max. 50 people. 6' distancing between households.	YES No max., provided there is 6' distancing between households.	Follow all local/state government limits on group size and building capacity.
CAN WE ALL SING OUTDOORS?	YES Everyone masked. 6' distancing between households.	YES Everyone masked. 6' distancing between households.	Hallelujah!
CAN WE ALL SING INDOORS?	NO	NO	Indoor congregational singing is not yet safe. This is being monitored & regional information will follow.
CAN ANYONE SING INDOORS?	NO live singing. Solo or household vocal and wind instrument performances may be recorded with masks and 6' distancing.	MAYBE Follow "Guidelines for Safe Singing" to allow for a small number of vocalists.	
CAN WE SERVE HOLY COMMUNION?	YES Pre-packaged elements may be distributed but not consumed in person.	YES Follow guidance or plan for safety.	
CAN WE HAVE A BAPTISM?	YES Everyone masked. 6' distancing between households. Pastor maintains 6' distance except during administration of water.	YES Follow guidance or plan for safety.	More detailed guidance here (see p. 23-25)
CAN WE OFFER FOOD OR DRINKS?	NO	MAYBE Requires your team to have researched & planned for safety.	Ministries that alleviate hunger may continue within CDC guidelines. Safe Local Practices must be in keeping with current CDC guidance.
CAN OUR YOUTH (JR./SR. HIGH) GATHER?	YES Max. 50 people. Everyone masked. 6' distancing between households.	YES No max. group size. Everyone masked. 6' distancing between households.	Follow all local/state government limits on group size and building capacity.
CAN CHILDREN GATHER AND/OR CAN WE OFFER CHILDCARE?	NO	MAYBE Follow CDC guidance.	Preschools that were previously approved for operation may continue.
DO OUTSIDE GROUPS WHO USE OUR BUILDING FOLLOW SAME GUIDELINES?	YES Church is responsible for ensuring Basic Standard Practices are followed.	YES Church is responsible for ensuring Safe Local Practices are followed.	
WHAT ABOUT MISSION TRIPS AND OTHER OVERNIGHT GATHERINGS?	NO	MAYBE Work with your DS or DCM to find and follow applicable guidelines.	