

A PASTORAL LETTER AND COVID RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE HEARTLAND CONFERENCE LEADERSHIP ROUNDTABLE

November 18, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

We have experienced spread of the COVID virus in some of our congregations and have received reports of deaths that can be directly attributed to that spread. We do not want congregations to experience a spread of the virus or, God forbid, the death of those who have gathered. Religious organizations, churches, must do their part in helping to limit the COVID virus. Therefore, we jointly offer the following as our best counsel for this season, when the COVID-19 pandemic rages throughout our Conference, Associations and Congregations.

We strongly recommend that churches not conduct in-person worship for at least the remainder of 2020. We recognize that this recommendation includes both Advent and Christmas, and deeply regret that this may entail a shift in usual holiday plans. While this seems drastic, it is necessary. We are making these recommendations to prevent the spread of the pandemic and to save lives.

We urge the Denomination, Conferences, Associations, and Congregations to refrain from in-person meetings for at least the remainder of 2020. We have all been engaged in electronic meetings. While not ideal, these meetings have served us well. Such meetings may represent a new normal for how we conduct our business together and for how we plan our shared and collaborative ministries.

We pray continually for persons in our churches, in our judicatories, and throughout the denomination, that our efforts might contribute to curbing this pandemic in our neighborhoods and communities. We want our people healthy and safe, and we want our communities healthy and safe. We only hope that the efforts we recommend here contribute, in some way, to that end. More detailed guidelines regarding ministry practice in this season may be found on the following pages.

You are in our prayers.

The Heartland Conference Leadership Roundtable Members:

David Long-Higgins (Transitional Conference Minister), Daniel Busch (Northwest Association Minister), Patricia Battle (Central Southeast Association Minister), Nayiri Karjian (Living Water One General Minister), and Carl Robinson (Southwest Ohio Northern Kentucky Association Designated Minister).

SUGGESTED GUIDELINE FOR IMMEDIATE CLOSURE OF IN-PERSON WORSHIP AND GATHERINGS FALL, THANKSGIVING AND CHRISTMAS SEASON 2020

We are now entering the eighth month of living through the COVID-19 pandemic. As your Leadership Roundtable we give thanks for the ways you have faithfully served God during this difficult and stressful time. Throughout this tenure we have been impressed with the diligence with which each Church has discerned how to minister through the COVID-19 pandemic. Here are a few examples:

- You have developed COVID-response teams with members who share their medical and technical expertise for the health and safety of your church and community.
 - You have developed and implemented guidelines regarding when and how you will return to in-person gatherings.
 - You have learned how to joyfully worship online using various forms of technology.
 - You have generously given your money to ensure that your Church will continue to serve.
 - You have creatively utilized the warm weather to safely gather outside for worship and ministry.
- Thank you!

Sadly, COVID cases are rising again. The first case of COVID-19 in US was reported 299 days ago on January 21, 2020. Yesterday, on November 17, the country reported 166,045 new confirmed cases and 995 deaths.¹

These numbers are sobering. We cannot be negligent or uninterested in caring for one another. This document provides three suggested guidelines for all Heartland Conference and Association churches for this Fall. They are:

1. Suggested Guideline for Immediate Closure of In-Person Worship and Gatherings
2. Suggested Guideline for Development of a Minister's COVID-Preparations Plan
3. Suggested Guideline for Only Virtual Advent and Christmas Services for 2020

Please note that these guidelines are our best, hopefully wisest, suggestions at this time. We are aware that each Church must discern what the most appropriate plan of action is for itself. Please contact any of us if you have questions or concerns regarding the information in these guidelines.

Also note that we are aware of the grief and the loss we are all experiencing at this time. We understand the need to gather, to be in community, to celebrate with one another. We are also aware that these unusual times call us to unusual ways of doing and being. We pray that God's compassionate wisdom would renew our spirits as we continue to be the Church through this COVID-19 pandemic.

¹ <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>. Johns Hopkins University. 10-26-20.

SUGGESTED GUIDELINE FOR IMMEDIATE CLOSURE OF IN-PERSON WORSHIP AND GATHERINGS FALL, THANKSGIVING AND CHRISTMAS SEASON 2020

As your Conference and Association Ministers we implore you to suspend all in-person worship and gatherings for the near future until there is a decrease in COVID-19 cases in your area.

As winter arrives it will prevent us from gathering outside tempting us to gather inside the Church building. We strongly discourage this because many church heating systems have poor ventilation systems, which could put members and church staff at risk especially if they remove their mask.

Losses because of COVID continue to rise. This is not a hoax or a joke. For the safety of our ministers, members, church staff, and ministry settings, please consider suspending all in-person gatherings immediately and worship virtually.

Despite our strong recommendation not to gather, we also recognize that some of Heartland's congregations will continue to gather. For those who will gather, please meet in live gatherings of no more than ten (10) people, where distancing of at least six feet (6') is maintained and where masks are constantly worn by every person present. If more than ten people are present, take extreme care to diminish personal interaction, including, but not limited to, no singing or liturgical recitation, no hugging, no hand shaking, no close conversation, no passing of peace, no sharing of communion elements or passing of offering plates. Maintain patterns of distance in arrival and departure.

Additional Resources:

- [CDC Guidelines for People at Increased Risk](#)
- [CDC Events and Gatherings: Readiness and Planning Tool](#)
- [CDC Guidelines for Coping With Stress](#)

SUGGESTED GUIDELINE FOR DEVELOPMENT OF A MINISTER'S COVID-PREPARATIONS PLAN FALL, THANKSGIVING AND CHRISTMAS SEASON 2020

As COVID-19 cases increase, all ministers would be wise to preemptively develop a plan in case they contract the Coronavirus. This plan prevents expending immense energy while suffering from the onset of COVID. Ministers, we encourage you to prayerfully develop your plan as you discuss these matters with your family, Church Council, and possibly your Church at your earliest convenience. Our hope is that you won't have to use this COVID-Preparations Plan, but it is helpful to think through all the questions in advance just in case.

Worship

- If the sole responsibility resides with you:
 - Consider asking an area UCC church that is worshipping virtually if your church can temporarily worship with them online.
 - Consider using Conference, Association or other UCC worship services that can be easily used for the congregation.
- If worship planning is shared among staff or there are ministers in the church:

- Consider asking the staff to prepare a few worship services in case you need to be absent for a few weeks.
- Consider asking ministers, who are church members that are able and willing to step in (consider asking them in advance so that they can have a few worship services developed in advance)

Pastoral Care:

- Identify church members, who are willing to call or send notes to members needing support or care.
- Ask ministers who are church members if they would be willing to provide general pastoral care in your absence.
- Make arrangement with nearby pastoral colleagues for more serious pastoral care issues.

Funerals/Memorial Services:

- Ask one (or multiple) nearby UCC pastor colleagues to officiate any funerals or memorial services if there is a death in your church.
- Talk to the family about considering postponing the memorial service until you recover.

Technology:

- If the sole responsibility resides with you for scheduling zoom meetings and/or live streaming technology:
 - Ask one member comfortable with zoom and/or streaming technology to perform these responsibilities in your absence.
- If a staff member oversees the technology:
 - Make sure there is a member who can serve as that person's back up or liaison in case they have any questions.

Administration:

- If the sole responsibility resides with you:
 - Consider how your routine responsibilities will be handled in your absence (check mail, answer phone, etc.)
 - If you co-sign checks with the treasurer, make a plan for a substitute signatory.
 - Talk to your Church Council regarding whether they will meet in your absence.
- If you have staff:
 - Consider who will convene staff meetings and regular administrative responsibilities in your absence.
 - Delegate a staff member (if appropriate) to attend the Church Council meeting if they decide to still have their meeting electronically.

Sick Leave and Vacation Paid Time Off (PTO):

- Check to see how much Sick Leave, Vacation, or general Paid Time Off you have remaining (or will have at the beginning of 2021).
- Meet with your Human Resources Committee and Church Council regarding your PTO plan especially if you don't have a lot of PTO.
- Save your medical leave for truly crisis situations such as being admitted to the hospital for an extended amount of time.

Communications:

- Write a communication letter if you test positive ahead of time. Give it to your Office Manager with directions of when and how to send it as well as copy your Church Council Moderator.
- Turn off your email while you are sick (just as you would on family leave or vacation). Include an out-of-office message that directs people to a specific contact person such as the Church Council president.
- Change the message on your cell phone and church's voicemails to say that you will be away for a few weeks.
- If you have a regular newsletter or e-newsletter, ask someone to oversee this in your absence. If you are the sole staff member, it's okay to postpone the newsletter in your absence.

Church Council:

- Talk with your Church Council about your plan so that they know what they need to be prepared to handle in your absence.
- It's okay to reduce Church activities in your absence if you are the sole staff.
- Tell them what you expect they will and will not do in your absence (don't make huge decisions that you would normally have input and leadership around).

Personal/Family:

- Contact your healthcare provider to confirm your coverage on the following:
 - Hospital providers, medical leave, medication and COVID-supply coverage
- Create a family plan for how you will isolate from the rest of your family if they test negative
 - Will your beloved sleep in the same room?
 - Can you use separate bathrooms from other family members?
- Food Preparation
 - How will meals be prepared?
 - What online delivery services are available and have special discounts for continual usage (Door Dash, Uber Eats, and Grub Hub are some delivery services)?
 - Does your grocery store deliver?
 - Make sure to put in the comments to leave the meal at the door so that you prevent contact with the delivery person (and make sure to tip generously!).
- Finances
 - If you pay the bills, you can automate your bills so that you don't have to worry about mailing bills while you are sick.
 - Does your family have enough money for incidentals for 2-3 weeks?
 - If you become temporarily financially challenged, please let the Conference or the Association know.

Additional Resources:

- [CDC Guidelines If You Have COVID-19](#)
- [CDC Guidelines if You are Caring for Someone with COVID-19](#)
- [CDC Guidelines on When to Quarantine](#)

SUGGESTED GUIDELINE FOR ONLY VIRTUAL ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS SERVICES FOR 2020

As your Leadership Roundtable, we strongly discourage all in-person worship and gatherings for the Advent and Christmas season this year.

For the month of October alone Ohio and neighboring states have experienced record numbers of new COVID cases and deaths, according to Johns Hopkins University data.² Research has shown that a few weeks after a holiday (i.e., Memorial Day, July 4th, and Labor Day), an increase in COVID cases is reported.³ Since Thanksgiving precedes Advent and Christmas, it is anticipated that December could culminate in more COVID cases and deaths in our communities. For these reasons, as well as the health and well-being of all members, ministers, church staff, and visitors, it is extremely unwise to worship or gather in person during the month of December.

We are aware that Advent and Christmas seasons provide comfort and inspiration through gatherings and celebrations, and that our churches have long held traditions that bring joy and meaning to the season. We are also aware that if Churches hold these events in person, many members and families, who are physically vulnerable to the Coronavirus will attend despite the virus. In case, ministers and Church Councils are struggling with particular Advent and Christmas events, we offer a chart to specify whether these events can be held in-person or virtually.

<u>Advent and Christmas Events and Worship Gatherings</u>	<u>In-Person</u>	<u>Virtual</u>
Hanging of the Greens	NO	Yes
Caroling	Outdoors	Yes
Christmas Parties	No	Yes
Children's Christmas Pageant	NO	Yes
Choir Cantata	NO	Yes
Candlelit Singing Silent Night	Outdoors	Yes
Christmas Eve	NO	Yes
Christmas Day	No	Yes

This year we encourage you to set aside what we've always done in times of comfort and recognize that this time is different – it is dangerous and deadly. And different times call for different ways of living. We urge you to let go of what you have always done before and create new ways to celebrate God's love born anew during Advent and Christmas despite all the limitations. Perhaps then we all can experience the season anew with new traditions and new meaning ushering in the peace, goodwill and wellbeing promised to all. Do this with the trust that next year will be different!

Additional Resources:

[CDC Considerations for Religious Organizations](#)

² <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/region>

³ <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/coronavirus-cases-and-hospitalizations-rise-weeks-after-memorial-day/>
<https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-contact-tracer-cases-are-rising-after-memorial-day-2020-6>