

# Re-Opening Church Buildings in the Time of COVID-19 And a Bit of Spiritual Care at the End

A Report by Patricia Wood to Skyland Community Church Council  
July 13, 2020

“We always need to consider what is possible (legally), what is prudent, and what is pastoral—especially for the most vulnerable people we serve.”

--Rev. Kerri Parker, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Council of Churches

I have here assembled pertinent information about re-opening church buildings for community use (and a bit more). The summary is this:

1. Until there is a vaccine available to everyone, use of indoor spaces is risky when it involves more than one person from more than one household. (Not family, one household.)
2. Check with your liability insurance provider if you think you might proceed.
3. Be prepared to clean, clean, clean in masks, gloves, and eye protection before, during, and after any event, gathering, or meeting.
4. Six feet of social distancing in every direction is a necessity.
5. Food or drink served/consumed onsite is a whole new level of risk because masks are removed.
6. Singing, praying aloud, public speaking, shouting, laughter, coughing, sneezing, baying at the moon are just as bad as no social distancing. Not to be done.
7. NO Touching, not even elbows (people sneeze into them and are too close.)

CDC: “The risk of COVID-19 spreading at events/gatherings increases as follows:

**Lowest risk:** Virtual-only activities, events, and gatherings.

**More risk:** Smaller outdoor and in-person gatherings in which individuals from different households remain spaced at least 6 feet apart, wear cloth face coverings, do not share objects, and come from the same local area (e.g., community, town, city, or county).

**Higher risk:** Medium-sized in-person gatherings that are adapted to allow individuals to remain spaced at least 6 feet apart and with attendees coming from outside the local area.

**Highest risk:** Large in-person gatherings where it is difficult for individuals to remain spaced at least 6 feet apart and attendees travel from outside the local area.”

**Skyland Church Council, proposed and passed at Council Meeting on July 13, 2020:**

**Because there is neither vaccine nor cure for the COVID-19 Pandemic at this time; and further because opening church buildings for either community or religious gatherings cannot provide for physical safety, nor for our moral and ethical responsibilities to each other or to the community; therefore, the doors of Skyland Church and Whitaker Hall will remain closed to all public gatherings until the situation is reevaluated in six months.**

## Online Resources

### **CDC Guidelines for Events and Gatherings:**

[https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/large-events/considerations-for-events-gatherings.html?deliveryName=USCDC\\_2067-DM32743](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/large-events/considerations-for-events-gatherings.html?deliveryName=USCDC_2067-DM32743)

### **CDC Checklist for Planning to Open Community Facilities:**

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/community/COVID19-events-gatherings-readiness-and-planning-tool.pdf>

### **CDC Guidelines for cleaning public spaces:**

[https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2020-04/documents/316485-c\\_reopeningamerica\\_guidance\\_4.19\\_6pm.pdf](https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2020-04/documents/316485-c_reopeningamerica_guidance_4.19_6pm.pdf)

### **EPA website:**

List available of approved cleaning fluids or wipes with brand and standing time (before wiping off) varying from 30 seconds to 10 full minutes. Gloves, eye protection, and masks to be worn during cleaning.

<https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2-covid-19>

### **CDC Checklist for disinfecting community facilities**

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>

### **CDC: Resuming Business Toolkit for Non-Healthcare Workplaces**

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/resuming-business-toolkit.html>

### **CDC: Considerations for Communities of Faith**

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/faith-based.html>

**Summary of basic recommendations for gatherings involving food: (UCC and CDC and EPA)** Check with your insurance provider to ensure compliance with any policy requirements

- A. UCC does not recommend gatherings with food consumption on site. Meal-delivery programs have had success with gloved and masked food preparers at safe distance from each other, but only with food packaged for delivery to homes or dispersal sites, not consumed onsite.
- B. If you must have food or picnic: Open air out doors is best; indoor with flowing air and open doors and windows is better than fans with closed doors; closed doors and windows with no fans or circulation of outdoor air is very high risk.
- C. Do health check the participants and any staff at entrance with thermometer, and questions about recent coughs, fevers, and proximity to sick persons. "Yes" to any question means, "No admit."
- D. Maintain 6 feet social distancing in all directions, at all times, including at tables indoors or outdoors.
- E. Masks required at all times when not eating. Consider requiring the sponsoring organization to have masks available at the door.
- F. Sharing potluck food from home kitchens is not recommended. Any food served should be from a commercial kitchen and pre-packaged as individual meals. NO help-yourself buffet or platters/bowls on the common table.
- G. IF there are food servers or table cleaners, they must be fully masked and gloved.
- H. No singing, group readings, or prayer. Individual speakers must be at least 12 feet from other persons. When speaking to the group use of a microphone is preferable to raised voices (don't forget to clean the microphone between speakers.)
- I. Restroom handles, doors, stalls, flushers, soap pumps, and water faucets to be cleaned between uses.
- J. Before and after event: Clean all surfaces touched by ungloved hands: soap and water all surfaces first; 10 minutes minimum air dry before disinfecting step. Cleaning personnel must wear masks, gloves, and eye protection is recommended.
- K. Key times to wash hands with soap and water for 20 seconds:
  - Immediately after removing gloves and after contact with a person who is sick.
  - After blowing one's nose, coughing, or sneezing
  - After using the restroom
  - Before eating/preparing food
  - After contact with animals or pets
  - Before and after providing care for another personHand sanitizer: If soap and water are not available and hands are not visibly dirty, use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. However, if hands are visibly dirty, always wash hands with soap and water.
- L. Post signs in highly visible locations (entrances, restrooms, gathering halls, meeting rooms) that describe how to stop the spread of germs by proper hand washing and properly wearing a cloth face covering.

## From the UCC Insurance Board:

Our insurance serves you so you can serve God.



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PH: 800.437.8830 | FAX: 216.736.3239

www.InsuranceBoard.org



We have compiled this resource to address some of the more frequently asked questions from churches.

Is there increased liability if someone gets sick or alleges they got sick from attending a church event, worship service, or from working or volunteering at my church?

• It is the responsibility of the church to communicate, implement, and enforce the guidelines set forth by the experts to ensure the safety of their employees, volunteers, congregants and visitors. It is equally important they follow the specific safety protocols they are adopting. With that said, there is an increased risk. The best thing a church can do is follow best practices as recommended by reputable health care guidance from the CDC, in addition to state and local health guidelines. If a church does not follow the guidelines, they risk liability implications and potential legal consequences (contact an attorney).

If someone files a COVID-19 liability claim against my church what coverage do we have?

• Coverage determinations are dependent upon the allegation (s) and causation. In general, we believe that the standard defense and indemnity coverage should apply to most potential coronavirus allegations against churches. As always, each claim will be evaluated individually based upon the facts when making the determination of coverage.

Is there increased liability if someone gets sick or alleges they got sick as a result of a third party's operations at the church? Do facility use agreements/rental agreements need to be updated? How does the church ensure the third parties adhere to their protocols?

• There may be increased liability; third party agreements should be updated to include the COVID-19 safety measures being adopted by the church. We encourage churches to work with a local attorney to make sure safety measures are following CDC, as well as state and local guidelines, and to draft language that ensures vendors/users/tenants comply with the church's new safety policies. The local attorney should update facility use agreements to include the church's new safety policies preventing the spread of COVID-19, making sure there is proper indemnification language, as well as expectations of the church and the tenants/users.

## COVID-19 Liability FAQ

"The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands." (Acts 17:24, NRSV) In a Pastoral letter from the Leadership of the Wider United Church of Christ, UCC leaders shared this message: "Of all the things we could say, we lead with this principle: Please make every decision based on how it will affect the most vulnerable among you. Many of us will be able to attend services and activities as fully healthy, low- risk individuals. Others, though, will come out of a deep love for and obligation to their church, deciding to take a risk in order to be back with their church family. We urge you to keep that in mind as you process your decisions."

Churches should stay current on guidelines and recommendations of the Center for Disease Control (CDC), and adhere to best practices as set forth by state and local authorities. The new protocols your church develops will take time to communicate and implement to ensure the safety of all. We encourage churches to use caution, diligence, and consistency in protecting the health of participants, employees, volunteers, congregants and visitors.

Should we consider a waiver for volunteers, worship participants, employees, etc.?

• This is a question best asked of your local attorney, as laws vary from state to state. Churches should understand that adopting a waiver does not relinquish their duties to protect staff, congregants, volunteers, and visitors; a waiver should not be perceived as a safety net against potential liability claims.

## In the Time of COVID-19: Considerations

How is negligence proven?

- Generally, negligence occurs if
  - you owe a duty to another party;
  - you breach that duty;
  - the breach leads to a compensable injury/loss; and
  - the breach is the proximate cause of the injury/loss.
- If someone gets sick while attending worship service or an activity/ event at the church and that person alleges the church was somehow negligent in their duties to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the church may have liability.

Are there certain outreach ministries that are too risky to resume now?

- Any activity where multiple people are interacting is a risk. We urge churches to forgo programs and activities where national, state and local health and safety guidelines cannot be consistently followed; this includes youth activities. We will provide updated guidelines on youth activities and specific outreach ministries moving forward as we cautiously navigate through these unprecedented times. As church leaders make decisions to conduct outreach ministries, Insurance Board encourages them to consider if it is prudent to do so.

Please review and discuss these concerns and their implications as you consider reopening; there are a number of tasks to tackle in the preparation phase that will keep congregations quite busy. Stay current on [out- break trends](#) in your state as you make decisions. We advise churches to focus first on preparing their church property, and consider how to safely conduct daily operations before attempting to hold in-person worship services or events.

*Insurance Board is located in the building of UCC's National Office, where everyone is working remotely until there has been 14 consecutive days of declining cases in the U.S. Here is a link where you will find our [COVID-19 Resource Page](#) containing a number of resources.*

## **Election Day, November 3, 2020**

We will also need to consider how to accommodate Whitaker Hall as a voting site. First, we can hope that people will make use of the all-California mail-in voting policy and will thus reduce the numbers of people needing to keep social distance while waiting to vote (possibly in the rain. We can hope!) Because Whitaker Hall is not a very large space, we may need to have some people wait in their cars in the parking lot. That may require a parking lot attendant or two. Then, someone to open the doors (so that everyone is not touching the doors) and make sure everyone is wearing a mask (provide masks?) We will need to arrange for a person or persons to clean the restrooms after use.

These and more concerns are addressed here:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/election-polling-locations.html>

## **NCNC\_UCC**

Blog post June 3, 2020, NCNC Conference Minister Diane Weible  
“Let’s Talk About: Reopening”

<https://ncnc.dreamhosters.com/2020/05/21/lets-talk-about-reopening/>

Blog post May 28, 2020, Rev. Curran Reichert, First Congregational Church Sonoma:  
“Let’s Talk About: Wait With Me”

<https://ncnc.dreamhosters.com/2020/05/28/11437/>

### **from The Christian Century magazine:**

10 Guidelines for Pastoral Care During the Coronavirus outbreak

<https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/guest-post/10-guidelines-pastoral-care-during-coronavirus-outbreak>

### **from Chaplaincy Innovation: “Prayers for those Affected by COVID-19”**

<https://chaplaincyinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Covid19-Prayers-from-Cincinnati-Childrens-Hospital-Chaplains.pdf>

Here is a sample prayer for us all:

God,

You know right now things feel scary.

We are worried, and my child does not feel well. But even now, we know we are not alone.

Love surrounds us like warm blankets.

Hope is still there, even when we can't always see it. Everywhere we look, there are doctors and nurses and helpers.

May our hearts be filled with peace instead of worry, Hope instead of fear,

Thankfulness for all of the helpers, instead of loneliness.

May we hold tight to each other,

believing that even when it is hard and painful, it will get better. May my child’s body heal just like it should,

and may their pain be gone.

May angels watch over us,

and may we rest in peace and hope.

Amen.