

Iowa Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church Crisis Response Re-Entry Plan



April 29, 2020

share

The Iowa Annual Conference Crisis Operations Team is providing this Re-Entry Plan for the Iowa Conference of The United Methodist Church. This plan is guided by John Wesley's *Three Simple Rules*, which provides a message and methodology of how to approach our strategic and compassionate plan to care for our churches and communities through COVID-19. Wesley's rules have been placed within a stoplight framework to guide us as we move through a graduated 3-Level reentry process from red to yellow to green status in an intentional and careful model of care and mutual accountability.

Levels:

Level 3: Red Light Status: Stop all non-critical gatherings. Essential workers only. This is the "Stay in Love with God" and stay home phase of our ministry. Right now it is best to err on the side of distancing even as we have received new guidelines from the Iowa Governor's Office.

Level 2: Yellow Light Status: Cautionary Return. We anticipate this will cover a number of months. As the IAUMC, we want to “Do Good” as restrictions are lifted. This means a gradual return to gatherings and doing so in a cautionary manner.

Level 1: Green Light Status: When we finally reach the “Do No Harm” phase—it will be because the virus is contained and our people are safe. Permission will be granted to communities of faith to return to full activity and mass gatherings will be permitted. This will be in place only as church leadership is confident in the care of their community of faith. Green lighting for all activities will likely be guided by testing protocol for asymptomatic COVID-19 carriers, antibody testing, therapeutic drug therapies aggressively caring for those who have contracted COVID-19, and approval and availability of a COVID-19 vaccine.

The Iowa Conference of The United Methodist Church recognizes returning to full participation will be based on the oversight of the Office of the Bishop, Crisis Response Team, state and national guidelines, as well as the seasonal movement of the virus. It is our expectation pastoral and laity will read through this document together allowing it to guide the response of your local faith community.

Level 3 Status Through May 31, 2020:

- **Level 3: Red Light Status:** Stop all non-critical gatherings. Essential workers only. This is the "Stay in Love with God" and stay home phase of our ministry. Right now it is best to err on the side of distancing even as we have received new guidelines from the Iowa Governor's Office.
- Iowa Conference of The United Methodist Church continues in **Level 3: Red Light Status** through May 31 at which point that status will be reassessed.
- High risk individuals should practice sheltering in place. This would include: people over 60, those with underlying conditions or other vulnerabilities, those who have tested positive, and those who have been exposed to someone COVID-19 positive in the last 14 days. This includes staff, volunteers, parishioners and guests.

Level 3 Protocols

- Churches of the Iowa Conference are strongly encouraged to continue holding online worship services (live or pre-recorded).
- Worship teams and essential staff are to maintain proper physical distances of 6-10 feet and attend to the governor's approved numbers for gathering. At this time, though the Governor's restrictions have been reduced in certain counties, the Bishop's office is strongly encouraging no gatherings of more than 10 until June 1 when this will be re-evaluated.
- For essential church staff (paid/volunteer): office hours can be resumed with proper physical distancing of 6-10 feet. Visitors and team functions should be limited to essential workers only. If possible, provide masks for those visiting the office. We recommend safe practices and disinfecting areas as a work priority.

Staff should wear masks, engage in frequent handwashing, pause in their work for regular wipe downs of the office/equipment (including personal computers and phones) and non-use of restrooms if/when possible. You are encouraged to place hand-sanitizing stations throughout your facility, including at your entrance/exit areas.

- Check with your insurance carrier to see if they have any particular guidelines for your church to follow.
- Church councils, finance teams, staff parish relations, trustees and other administrative/operational leadership teams of less than 10 might consider meeting in person while wearing masks and maintaining physical distancing of 6-10 feet, however, we strongly encourage continuing meetings online.
- Program and generational meetings: These include: Bible studies; UMW, Age Level Ministries (confirmation, youth group), recovery groups, and other small groups would continue to meet online if possible. For adult groups (18+) that choose to meet in person, maintain proper distancing of 6-10 feet, require masks and limit gathering size to approved numbers. Please ensure all surfaces are wiped down after the gathering. Spend extra attention to high-traffic areas, including restrooms.
- For ministries of children or youth or ministries with a vulnerable population, we encourage you to gather **on-line only**. No Nursery or spaces that host children and youth should be accessed at this time.

Church Finances

- Encourage online giving directly to your church through a reputable e-giving source. You may set up online giving directly to your church through the Iowa Conference by contacting Margaret Biggs, Conference Treasurer at 515-974-8919 for more information.
- Be sure you are inviting and encouraging people to maintain their contributions as best they are able.

Worship Services and Special Gatherings

- For those who have been leading worship from home, as you resume recording in the sanctuary, maintain 6-10 ft of space between people that are part of your worship team. Maintain group size standards as determined by the Governor's Office.
- Life rituals (weddings, funerals) should be kept to less than 10 in attendance; this is to accommodate the maximum number (10) allowed; group totals include clergy and other professional staff.
- If you are considering allowing building users/renters back in (philanthropic partnerships, civic organizations, etc.) for their essential work, observe gathering limits, safety procedures including mask usage, distancing protocols, and that church personnel is able to accommodate cleaning needs. Consider church liability as you make this decision and any guidelines your insurer might recommend.

- Utilize gloved and masked door and elevator greeters to be in charge of opening doors and pushing the elevator's buttons.

Church Preparation for Eventual Return - custodial staff and volunteers

- Deep clean your entire church. While we recognize our churches have been empty for weeks and the virus has limited potency after certain periods of time, deep-cleaning brings peace of mind and care of facility.
- Replace all HVAC filters (furnace, air conditioning, air cleaner devices) and increase frequency of filter replacement.
- Consider shampooing carpets and updating areas in need of a little TLC. This time of facility care can focus us on what we can do now to best prepare our entryways, external areas and internal spaces for the return of our congregants and those we connect with that will be new to our churches whom we reached through virtual church and community care.
- Sanitize pews, bathrooms, doorknobs, water fountains, light switches, and microphones. Provide access to sanitizing wipes so folks can wipe down spaces with which they come in contact.
- Pay special attention to the nursery/preschool/children's areas. While it will be some time before these spaces are open again for use, this level of care is deeply appreciated by families. Use this time to remove worn/broken toys and other clutter. If these projects require teams, maintain physical distancing, mask-wearing, shift work, etc.
- Make and Post signs about not shaking hands, physical distancing, and doing non-contact greetings. Post reminders and ways of practicing safe distancing at all entrances and throughout your building. Place these reminders above water fountains, in restrooms and other high traffic areas.
- Communicate these happenings to your congregation and community. Whether through facebook, email, flyers on doors/windows, a letter to the editor—tell your congregation and community how you are preparing the church for their return.

For recommendations on cleaning specific surfaces, we refer you to: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/disinfecting-your-home.html>

Level 2: Yellow Light Status: Cautionary Return. We anticipate this will cover a number of months. As the IAUMC, we want to “Do Good” as restrictions are lifted. This means a gradual return to gatherings and doing so in a cautionary manner. Even as we enter Yellow Light Status, high-risk individuals should practice sheltering in place. This would include: people over 60, those with underlying conditions or other vulnerabilities, those who have tested positive, and those who have been exposed to someone COVID-19 positive in the last 14 days. This includes staff, volunteers, parishioners and guests.

The shift from **Level 3: Red Light Status** to **Level 2: Yellow Light Status** will be by re-evaluation of the situation via the Bishop's Office and Crisis Operations Team of the IAUMC. Through the month of May, this team will be monitoring and gauging improving

conditions across the Iowa Conference before we shift from Level 3: Red Light Status to Level 2: Yellow Light Status.

Please maintain safety and sanitation practices of Level 3 as you enter into Level 2.
Level 2 Protocols

Worship:

- Churches over 50 average worship attendance (AWA): It is recommended that you continue holding online worship, recording from home or sanctuary with participation only in small groups. If there are multiple services, plan for managing the number of people per service. Consider small group worship or other alternatives.
- Smaller churches (under 50 AWA) might consider holding in-person worship, but need to accommodate the need for physical distancing of 6-10 feet. Contingency plans for overflow beyond the approved number of people may be required.
- Whichever alternative you choose, we recommend continuing to share worship online as there will be many who are high-risk and cannot join you, or may not feel safe to return even if precautions are in place.
- ***Have a plan in place to provide adequate time and supplies for assigned people to clean and sanitized exposed surfaces (including pew backs, door handles, bathrooms, and other high traffic areas between services.***

General recommendations for those leading and attending worship:

- Wear cloth face masks while at church as is also recommended in public spaces.
- Offering Baptisms and Communion/Eucharist safely will continue to be a challenge, as touching a face mask (to remove or shift it) contaminates it and brings with it varying levels of exposure. No skin-to-skin contact is recommended during baptisms; it is recommended that parents hold babies and small children as the pastor performs the rite. No contact must also be attended to as distribution of elements for communion is a risk to the communion steward as well as the recipient. One recommendation is to participate in the Great Thanksgiving at service end providing individual cups and bread. These must be provided by gloved stewards and placed in recipient's open hands upon exiting at the end of the service. This may mean some congregations will choose to further postpone offering in-person communion.
- Singing and liturgical responses are among the riskier practices when it comes to spreading droplets/aerosols which can carry the virus a significant distance and remain suspended in the air. A cloth mask is unlikely to be enough to protect you or your neighbor even as you practice appropriate physical distancing. ***The recommendation is to avoid singing/liturgical responses in the sanctuary while the congregation is gathered.***
- Use no-touch alternatives for passing the peace, collecting offering, and liturgical resources. Consider removing pew Bibles, hymnals and friendship pads especially if you will have multiple services. Use bulletins (***do not reuse***) or

screens as alternatives. If you keep these resources in the pews provide for wipe down after each service.

- For children's time, do not have children come forward. Instead, create from you-to-the-pew story moments engaging children from safe distancing.
- Distancing: Have people spread out in the sanctuary space. Allow only one family unit per pew with measured markers indicating proper physical distance in approved and marked seating areas. Explore meeting in a fellowship hall or outdoors if your space is small.
- Do not offer fellowship/coffee hour. Food and drink hospitality only resumes at green-light status. Continue encouraging people to leave the building rather than mingling.
- Consider offering life ritual services in more traditional ways. Funerals, weddings, graduation, and confirmation gatherings should pay careful attention to limiting and inviting guests and keeping proper physical distance.

Small Groups and Faith Formation:

- You may offer both in-person and online opportunities for Bible studies and small groups. We recommend maintaining online options you've established during Level 3: **Red Light Status** for at-risk populations and those who do not yet feel comfortable attending in-person.
- We strongly recommend against offering Vacation Bible School (VBS), mission trips or lock-ins until we reach Level 1: **Green Light Status**. While the risk to children and youth has been recorded as somewhat lower, there is an ongoing risk of viral transmission to other family members. Asymptomatic transmission of the COVID-19 virus has been observed.
- Consider whether you might offer an online, mailed or no-touch drop-off activity for children and youth.

Church Business

- Regular office functions (beyond essential business) may resume while maintaining physical distancing, wearing masks and following safety and sanitizing protocols.

Level 1: Green Light Status:

When we finally reach the "Do No Harm" phase - it will be because the virus is contained and our people are safe. Permission will be granted to communities of faith to return to full activity and mass gatherings will be permitted without restriction. This will be in place only as church leadership is confident in the care of their community of faith. Green lighting for all activities will likely be guided by testing protocol for asymptomatic COVID-19 carriers, antibody testing, therapeutic drug therapies aggressively caring for those who have contracted COVID-19, and approval and availability of a COVID-19 vaccine.

As we shift from **Level 2** to **Level 1**, know the timeline will be guided by ongoing

evaluation of the situation across the state of Iowa. You should anticipate and lead toward several weeks (and possibly months) of **Level 2 Status** as we monitor and respond to improving conditions and markers that need to be met before we shift from **Level 2: Yellow Status** to **Level 1: Green Status**.

In Closing

It is possible that COVID-19 cases will spike, decrease, and increase again. The Bishop's Office and Crisis Operations Team will assess the threat and issue a return to the appropriately restrictive status.

Please send your questions for clarification and comments to: iaumccares@iaumc.org. This document will be regularly reviewed and updated.

“Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.”
~ John Wesley