



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

VIRGINIA CONFERENCE

POST OFFICE BOX 5606
10330 STAPLES MILL ROAD

GLEN ALLEN, VIRGINIA 23058-5606

Sharma D. Lewis
RESIDENT BISHOP

TELEPHONE: 804/521-1102
FAX: 804/521-1178
E-MAIL: terribiggins@vaumc.org

Frequently Asked Questions Virginia Conference COVID-19 Precautions

Revised April 2, 2020

Below are Frequently Asked Questions about actions The Virginia Conference of The United Methodist Church is taking to protect congregants and to continue ministry during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these precautions are expected to remain in place for some time, until this crisis is clearly over. This document will be updated periodically.

Important Dates:

- **Sunday, March 29 – Sunday, April 26, 2020 -- In-person worship services are canceled (this includes Holy Week services) as well as any “drive-in” or “drive-thru” worship services.**
- **Preschools closed until March 30, 2020; childcare facilities with emphasis on serving children of essential personnel may begin reopening on March 30, 2020 according to the guidelines listed below or as soon as they are able to do so after March 30.**

- **Where do I find information about Virginia Conference information and precautions against COVID-19?**

All updates from Bishop Lewis concerning COVID-19 and directives for local churches can be found at: <https://vaumc.org/Coronavirus2020>.

- **Does the Bishop’s Office/conference center want to know if there are cases of COVID-19 in the Virginia Conference?**

Yes. First, report any known coronavirus cases to the local health department by clicking <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/health-department-locator/>. Next, communicate to your district superintendent and to the conference office by contacting Tom Joyce, Assistant to the Bishop, at TomJoyce@vaumc.org or 804- 521-1103.

- **Have local church worship services been canceled?**

In-person church services have been canceled for Sunday, March 29, 2020 through Sunday, April 26, 2020 due to the recent restrictions shared by Governor Northam on March 30. These dates may be extended as the Bishop and conference leaders continue to monitor this very fluid COVID-19 situation. All churches are encouraged to provide online worship opportunities and many are doing so. A sampling of these churches can be found on the [conference website](#).

- **Can churches hold a “drive-in” or “drive-thru” worship service in their church parking lot?**

No. This violates the letter and spirit of the state of emergency and related orders issued by Governor Northam which restrict travel and congregating. This is an issue of public health and safety during a pandemic. As such, our members and churches must respect these directives and not push the envelope to gather in these manners.

- **Are meetings and events canceled at local churches?**

Our churches have the option to remain open and attend to business in small groups (10 or less) and with proper social distancing (6 feet between individuals) or the option to reduce their hours as they see fit. Weddings and funerals will be restricted to 10 people or they should be postponed. Please use your discretion, remember the gathering size restrictions and make sure to use proper social distancing. Other church events can go on at the discretion of the clergy such as AA meetings, small group Bible studies, normal church meetings, etc. while limiting these to 10 people.

In light of this announcement, churches should make use of online options for church meetings. The entire Google G-Suite comes free with members and clergy who have @vaumc.org accounts. Google Meetings has removed the cost for its system through July 1. Google Meeting does not require your participants to have a Google account. Another option is Zoom which is free for unlimited meetings and up to 100 participants as long as your session does not exceed 40 minutes. Zoom has an app available on both IOS and Android.

- **Should weddings and funerals be canceled?**

All clergy and local churches in the Virginia Conference should use discretion and best practices when holding weddings and funerals at this time; these are limited to 10 people and participants need to observe 6 feet of social distance. Handle each funeral and wedding case by case, ensuring that you are working with the families concerning their needs and how best to protect their health and well-being. Be mindful of church seating capacity and observe a six feet distance between members and guests while seated and/or standing. Social distancing is an important component to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Be sure to also make use of the whole church. If churches have chapels, make use of

these spaces as well. At funerals, be mindful of grieving families and practice sensitivity as these should be ceremonies of comfort especially through the expression of hugs. At this time, CDC guidance states, “There is currently no known risk associated with being in the same room at a funeral or visitation service with the body of someone who died of COVID-19.” However, the CDC also notes, “People should consider not touching the body of someone who has died of COVID-19.” Therefore, you can make this recommendation to the families you serve. Learn more at: <https://www.nfda.org/covid-19>.

• **Are preschools directed to shut down? What about other childcare facilities?**

Preschools are to be closed until at least March 30, 2020. The Bishop and the Cabinet of the Virginia Conference recognize that child care facilities on United Methodist Church property may want to respond to the current COVID-19 emergency by continuing to operate under the new restrictions introduced by the Commonwealth of Virginia with particular service for the children of essential personnel. We offer these guidelines for such situations and **facilities may begin reopening on March 30, 2020 according to these guidelines or as soon as they are able to do so after March 30.**

Essential Personnel Childcare Services during the COVID-19 Emergency

The Bishop and the Cabinet of the Virginia Conference recognize that childcare facilities on United Methodist Church property may want to respond to the COVID-19 emergency by continuing to operate under the new restrictions introduced by the Commonwealth of Virginia with particular emphasis on serving the children of essential personnel. We offer these guidelines for such situations.

The Actions of the Commonwealth of Virginia

On Thursday, March 19, 2020, Governor Northam declared a [state of emergency](#) for Virginia, providing increased flexibility to ease regulatory requirements and procurement rules, continued federal and multi-state coordination, and ensuring continued access to critical services for the most vulnerable Virginians.

In addition, the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) Commissioner [issued a letter](#) for child care providers operating in the Commonwealth of Virginia, which included limits on group size to ten (10) and stringent public health guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID-19. An additional FAQ document from VDSS [detailing the measures child care facilities](#) must follow is available. One of your priorities is to provide childcare for children of “essential personnel” as those personnel are described by VDSS.

Childcare facilities on UMC property must follow these additional guidelines:

1. Encourage children, parents/guardians, and staff to protect their personal health and the health of others by staying home if they are sick and send anyone home who becomes sick;
2. Educate your childcare community and staff of the signs and symptoms of COVID-19. Conduct regular health checks of staff and children to look for symptoms of sickness and fever. Separate symptomatic people until they are picked up from the facility;

3. Classroom childcare settings must limit capacity to 10 individuals per room to include staff. Under the Safe Sanctuary policies of the Virginia Conference of the UMC, the ratio must be an 8:2 ratio (8 children:2 adults) per classroom;
4. Alter programming to increase distance between children;
5. Have staff and children wash their hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds and avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth;
6. Clean and disinfect objects and surfaces that are frequently touched;
7. Ensure that students are eating meals in the classroom; and
8. Besides the entities listed for contact, if a child, parent/guardian, or staff member develops COVID-19 symptoms or tests positive for COVID-19, the childcare director must immediately report it to the pastor, the District Office, and Rev. Tom Joyce, Assistant to the Bishop. Rev. Joyce's contact information is: TomJoyce@vaumc.org.

We recognize these are extraordinary times and those who work in childcare settings are offering a critical service to the larger community. We give thanks for those who offer care to the children of essential personnel at this time and pray God's blessings upon them. For questions, contact your local pastor or your district superintendent.

- **Should food pantries shut down?**

Churches should use best practices by continuing to monitor the advice and directives from our local, state, and national leaders and err on the side of caution to ensure that the facility is doing more good than harm. Facilities should not have more than 10 people at any one time and 6 feet should be observed in terms of social distancing. Take necessary precautions to make sure that food and other products remain safe for members, guests, and volunteers. Ensure that you have materials such as soap, hand sanitizer, tissues, covered waste bins, latex gloves (if available) and face masks (if available) for volunteers and those being served by the pantry.

You also should clean frequently touched surfaces and objects (counters, door knobs, light switches) daily. Dishes and/or silverware should be washed in hot water immediately after use or after an event either by machine or by wearing gloves. Trash should immediately be disposed (bagged, sealed, and taken to a dumpster) at various intervals during the day.

Learn more about cleaning and disinfection recommendations from the [CDC here](#).

- **What should I do if I think have COVID-19?**

See your doctor and contact the [VA Department of Health](#) immediately.

- **What should I do if someone I know has COVID-19, or if I think someone has it?**

Please urge that person to see a doctor immediately and contact the Department of Health.

- **What should be done in terms of facility cleaning if there is a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19 in a local church?**

The CDC website offers very detailed information concerning how a facility should be cleaned in this instance. View at the link: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/cleaning-disinfection.html#How%20to%20Clean%20and%20Disinfect>

- **What information does the conference have about COVID-19 screening tests?**

Due to rapidly escalating concerns associated with the coronavirus (COVID-19), Virginia United Methodist Pensions, Inc. (VUMPI) has directed Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield to waive all health plan member costs for the COVID-19 diagnostic test. Accordingly, any member enrolled in any of the Virginia Conference-sponsored health plans (including the high deductible HSA plan) who is directed by a medical provider or hospital to have a COVID-19 screening test, will have no out of pocket costs for the test. Accordingly, it is recommended that health plan members call their doctor in advance to ask how to obtain the screening.

VUMPI also encourages health plan members to consider using [LiveHealth Online](#), which is a covered service under the Conference-sponsored health plans. With LiveHealth Online, health plan members can use a smartphone, tablet or computer (with a webcam) to be evaluated by a board-certified physician. Please contact a member of VUMPI staff (804-521-1100) if you have questions or if any additional information is needed.

- **Where can I find financial information about local church giving during the pandemic, credit union assistance or information about the CARES Act?**

You can access information about donations, assistance and the CARES Act on the conference website at: <https://vaumc.org/coronavirusresources>.

- **What guidance is the conference office providing about apportionments for local churches in light of COVID-19?**

The Council on Finance and Administration (CFA) recognizes the impact that the pandemic is having on local churches in the Virginia Conference. After meeting over the last week, CFA is responding by prioritizing the apportionments for 2020 in an effort to relieve the impact our local churches are experiencing. By prioritizing apportionments, this will allow churches to pay the critical and essential amounts to support the Virginia Conference clergy and connection. CFA has divided apportionments into "Priority 1", making up 72.77% of the total apportionment with the remainder categorized as "Priority 2." Local churches will be asked to first pay into Priority 1, and they will be considered having paid 100% of the 2020 apportionment if the Priority 1 amount is paid in full. CFA is encouraging churches to pay into Priority 2 as their financial situation allows. The overall Conference Apportionments for 2020 has not changed, just strategically prioritized. More details will be shared by the conference Treasurer's Office on the conference website by Friday, March 27.

- **Who do I contact if I have questions?**

Direct your questions to your district superintendent. Contact information can be found here: <https://vaumc.org/Districts>.

- **Where can I find COVID-19 information from national and state leaders?**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is updating information daily at: <https://www.cdc.gov/>.

More information from Virginia Department of Health: <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/>.

More information is available with the National Institutes of Health at: <https://www.nih.gov/health-information/coronavirus>.

Information from Virginia Governor Ralph Northam can be found at: <https://www.virginia.gov/coronavirus-updates/>.

- **Are there pastoral guidelines for visiting the sick and shut-ins, hospitals, assisted living facilities and homes?**

1. First and foremost, it is important to know, and abide by, facilities' visitation guidelines. If you do not know them beforehand, please check and re-check them regularly. Many facilities have made and will continue to make visitation changes in order to protect patients.
2. For those who are seriously infirmed at home, especially the elderly, please obtain the permission of family members or guardians before making visits.
3. In addition to facilities' specific requirements, clergy should adhere to proper social distancing policy (six feet) when visiting any sick and shut-ins, hospitals, assisted living facilities, nursing homes or homes.
4. For those in hospitals, assisted living facilities and nursing homes, visits are restricted to emergencies only.
5. When visiting hospitals, assisted living facilities, nursing homes and homes, wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds both when you arrive and before you leave. Use hand sanitizer when you get back to your car.
6. Be creative and look to do virtual visits. Consider Zoom, FaceTime and other video-interaction or conference call options with patients and their families.
7. Always have some form of clergy ID on you, e.g., clergy credentials.

Revisions:

1. April 2 Revisions

- Pastoral guidelines for visiting during pandemic
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2. March 26 Revisions

- Further closures on in-person worship services in local churches
- Updated information about childcare facilities, food pantries, funerals and weddings
- Updated information concerning CDC facility cleaning
- Information from the Council of Finance and Administration (CFA) concerning 2020 apportionments

3. March 17 Revisions

- **Changed social distancing to be defined as 6 feet between individuals as advised by CDC.**
- **Added CDC information regarding funerals**

[Click here](#) to download this information in pdf format.