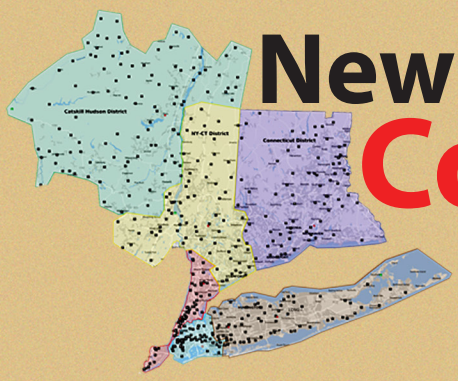

New York Annual Conference Covid-19 Guidelines For Church Reopening

New York Annual Conference
The United Methodist Church

SPRING 2020

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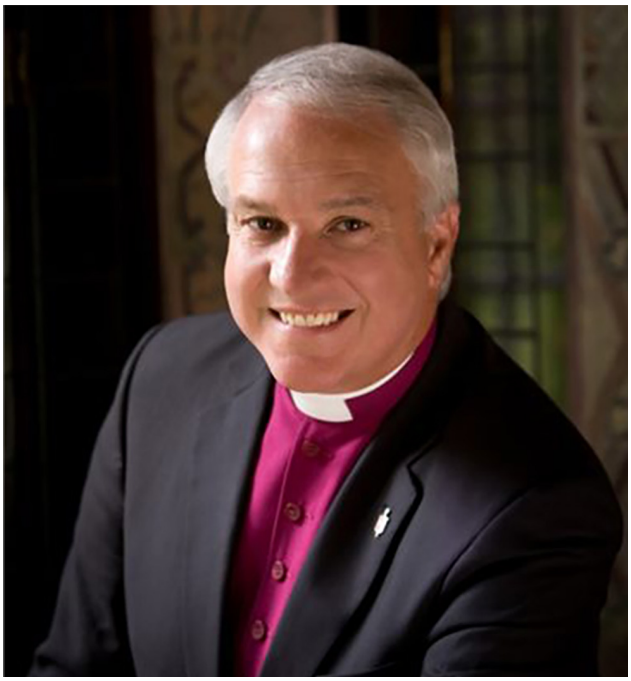
1 An Important Message from **Bishop Bickerton**



One of the most consistent ways to describe a Methodist is to talk about the link between Christian belief and Christian living. In our "Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Stance," the Book of Discipline clearly connects the unity of faith with the consistency of good works.

In order to communicate this connection between faith and works, John Wesley created "The General Rules." These directives were designed to be constant, yet simple reminders for those who participated in the Methodist societies.

Do No Harm
by avoiding evil of every kind.
Do Good
of every possible sort, and as far as possible, to all
Attend upon all the ordinances of God
by staying in love with God in disciplined ways

These rules were designed to help the Methodists see how they could move from general principles to specific actions. These very same rules of living are the ones we use as modern day Methodists to live out our discipleship. These very same rules simply describe the exact manner by which we have and will approach our systematic response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

This current global crisis is the latest in series of disastrous events that have beset us for as long as the human race has as existed. The only difference is that this crisis is one that we personally have to live through and navigate. This is our moment. Our moment to rise above and declare faith in the midst of uncertainty. This is our time. Our time to step up and demonstrate how we live out our faith in loving actions. Those actions must involve reaching out to the poor and disproportionately affected.

They will also be actions that are smart and well thought out as they inform how we reopen our churches and re-engage ourselves through in-person worship and ministry.

A few short years ago, our Annual Conference embraced a new Mission, Vision, and Core Values. These clear statements have been the baseline for guiding our work and informing every decision we make. When we established our mission, no one had any idea that we would be facing severe restrictions, social distancing, and reliance upon government officials, scientists, and health experts to inform us about our behaviors and practices.

It's interesting, given our current circumstances that our mission states clearly: *We strive to share God's love by CREATING safe places where all are accepted and welcomed, CONNECTING the needs of people to the presence of God, and TRANSFORMING the world through Christ.*

These past two months have presented never before seen challenges in our world and unprecedented impact within our churches. We have witnessed unbelievable levels of illness and death on one hand, and inspiring levels of creativity and inspiration on the other. We have been challenged and we have been blessed.

While significant restrictions remain in place, it is now time to begin thinking and preparing for when we might be able to engage in some form of reopening of our churches for worship and other forms of ministry.

Ultimately, the decisions concerning when and how we resume in-person worship and activity rests squarely on my shoulders. We are not a combination of independent churches. We are bound together in love and in a structure that is best described by our connectionalism. We are not in Florida, Georgia, or Mississippi where standards are relaxed quicker than ours. In every sector of this region there are churches that carry our name which means that it is important to consistently know what happens in and through each of these settings.

My role as your Bishop is to do everything possible to make sure that the heart of our theology and the expression of our faith is in alignment so our people are cared for, loved, and assured that in the midst of these uncertain times there is someone, somewhere that will make sure they are affirmed, safe, and blessed.

I urge you to read this document from cover to cover and begin the hard work of entering this next phase of our re-entry.

You will discover it will not be easy to comply with the guidelines. But it will be more difficult if we don't, because lives will be unnecessarily affected by our lack of intentionality and care.

I also urge you to make up your mind now to follow these guidelines thoroughly and completely.

You have a lot of work to do. So do I. So does my team. Let us not cause one another undue heartache and stress by not complying. Instead, let us with resolve move forward, determined that God WILL guide our steps on this uncharted path.

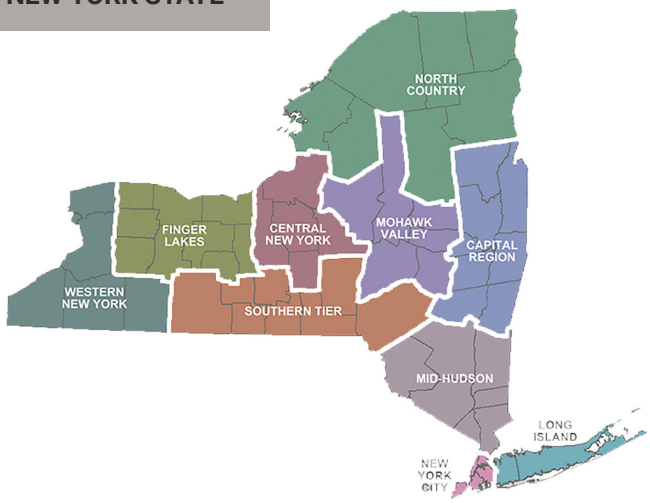
Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God. And if we do, I believe we will discover how wonderfully God WILL see us through.

The Journey Continues, . . .

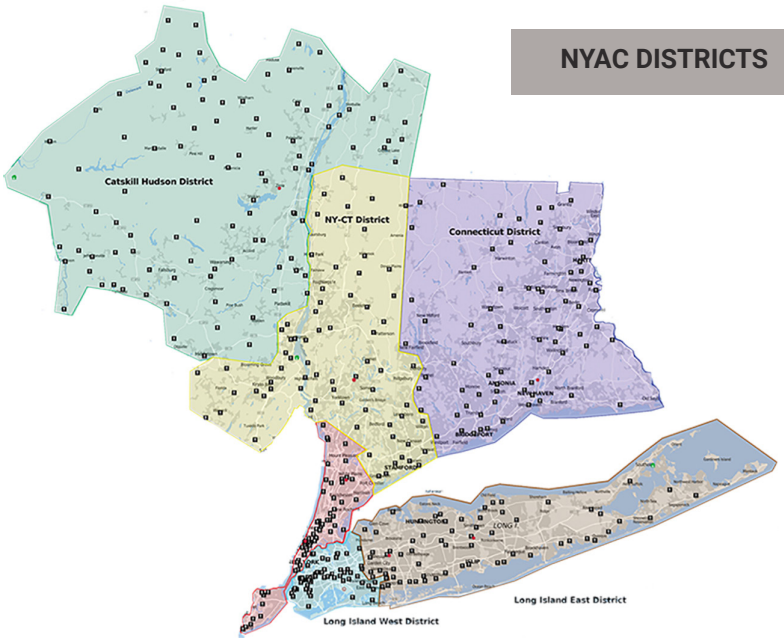
Thomas J. Bickerton
Resident Bishop

2 Specific Understanding Given the Unique Context of the New York Annual Conference

NEW YORK STATE



NYAC DISTRICTS



While we work toward potential reopening dates, it is appropriate to begin aggressively thinking and planning for reopening.

As we begin thinking and planning for the next step in our journey, there are also clear realities that emerge given the unique and diverse context of the New York Annual Conference.

Note the following:

- As Governor Cuomo stated in his most recent press conference, the dates for reopening will vary from state, county and region. There is no “one-size-fits-all” approach. Within the New York Annual Conference, reopening will be dependent upon the New York and Connecticut governments determining that it is safe to open. This means, reopening procedures for counties like Litchfield, Albany, Greene and Columbia will happen before counties like Nassau, Queens, Kings, New York, and the Bronx.
- Our New York churches are located within six of the established regions: Capital (partial), Mohawk (partial), Southern Tier (partial), Mid-Hudson, New York City, and Long Island (see the attached NYAC District Map).
- At press time, two regions (Southern Tier and Mohawk Valley) are beginning the first phase of reopening and the Capital region has been given the green light to reopen on May 20th. The additional three regions of New York (Mid-Hudson, New York City, and Long Island) will not meet the threshold for the beginning stage of reopening until June 13 at the earliest.

PLEASE NOTE: The dates for reopening our Churches may not coincide with the dates released by the State of Connecticut and New York.

- In Connecticut, there are no regions established. As a result, we will be looking at Connecticut by counties (Fairfield, New Haven, Hartford, Litchfield, and Middlesex). Of the eight Connecticut counties, the five within the bounds of our Conference have experienced the most hospitalizations and death.
- When restrictions are lifted in Connecticut, the initial acceptable threshold for churches to re-assemble will be those that worship less than 50 persons. Yet, as you will see below, the criteria for reopening any of our churches as well as adherence to the CDC guidelines will be the same throughout the Annual Conference.
- Neither New York nor Connecticut state governments have issued specific guidance or directly named faith communities in their plans for reopening.

The challenges we face when creating a potential reopening plan are significant given the complexity of the New York Annual Conference, which is guided by two state governments and the unprecedented density found within significant parts of our Conference.

We must listen carefully and plan accordingly giving it our best efforts to remain safe and smart. Remember, 97% of all deaths in New York and Connecticut have taken place within the bounds of the New York Annual Conference.

Currently, churches in Connecticut that worship less than 50 and in the regions of the Southern Tier and the Mohawk Valley may begin worship on Sunday, June 21, 2020.

There is no doubt that there is a lot of work to be done before we get the go-ahead to resume some form of in-person worship/ministry. We will continue to update you on the latest developments and decisions being made.

"NY Forward: A Guide to Reopening New York & Building Back Better" identifies critical factors for any reopening plan:

1. Protection for employees and customers.
2. Changes to the physical workspace.
3. The implementation of processes that meet our changing public health obligations.

These factors can easily be translated into the baseline criteria we will need to establish in all of our churches across the New York Annual Conference:

1. Protection for our leaders and parishioners, giving special attention to the most vulnerable populations that make up most of our constituency base.
2. Changes that must be made to our sanctuaries and other common gathering areas, with special attention given to office space and the use of our facilities by renters and other groups.
3. A clear realization that we cannot go back to the way we were before. Our changing public health landscape will require us to make significant changes in order to comply with health regulations placed upon us all by the pandemic.

In this publication you will find guidelines and requirements you will need to begin organizing in anticipation of reopening, no matter when it occurs.

3 Understanding Our Distinctive Position

The New York and Connecticut Guidelines do not specifically address churches. This document utilizes the latest Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Guidelines for faith communities.

When utilizing the New York State and Connecticut guidelines from a church reopening standpoint, the following can be gleaned: We easily fall into the category of dealing with a more high-risk, vulnerable population. This includes people of advanced age, people in highly-dense population centers and people in the racial and ethnic categories (Asian, Black and Hispanic) that are disproportionately affected by the virus.

RESETTING OUR EXPECTATIONS

- What future we will find ourselves in depends not only on the behavior of the virus, but on the actions of the people.
- For at least the next year, we anticipate our lives to be shaped by the timeline set by the Covid-19 virus.
- We must avoid framing our situation in terms of a choice between reviving our economy–or our churches –and saving lives.

If we don't continue our efforts to contain the virus, a new wave of infections and deaths will cause further damage, and we will lose what we've gained from the measures we have already taken. And, if we push the envelope too far by reopening our buildings and resuming gatherings prematurely, we may unfairly force our more vulnerable members to choose between keeping themselves and others safe and participating in congregational life like everyone else.

THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

It is abundantly clear that whether you are clergy or lay, you are eager to resume in-person worship and activity within your local church. It is also clear that our churches are suffering tremendous economic hardship in their ability to meet their obligations to remain open and vital in mission and ministry.

And, it is completely understandable that many are frustrated by the need for us to move slowly, intentionally, and prayerfully back into some kind of regular, in-person routine.

Still, we must keep in mind that we have a theological mandate to care for one another holistically in body, mind, and spirit. We also serve a large population base that has either been disproportionately affected or is at a higher risk of infection than others.

It is absolutely essential for everyone in leadership, lay and clergy alike, to lead with a non-anxious presence and with a spirit of hopefulness. It is also important for leaders to lead, to not allow rumors or emotions to dominate the landscape, to help people understand the need for elevated safety precautions to avoid further transmission, and to call all of our people to walk deliberately and smartly into this "new normal" that we will discover together.

4 Current Mode of Operation for NYAC Churches: Three Stages to Reopening

STAGE ONE: PRESENT REALITY

This is how all NYAC churches must currently operate until permission is given to move to the next stage.

1. Churches are closed for in-person gatherings and extracurricular use.

2. Exceptions are feeding ministries, homeless ministries, essential worship teams, IT personnel for livestreaming and videotaping, childcare services for essential workers, etc. These ministries must utilize strict safety and sanitation protocols and are only gathering to accomplish their essential, stated needs.

3. Churches are only recording online, livestreaming, or using video services. Worship teams are confined to five or less people.

4. The only personnel allowed in the building are those that come at an appointed hour to disinfect the building, make deposits, collect mail, etc. These restrictions currently apply to all churches in New York and Connecticut within the bounds of our Conference.

What Must We Do Immediately? At this point, each NYAC congregation should organize a team to begin exploring how to begin preparing for the next stage.

Please see page 17 for a "Worksheet for Protocol Planning and Reopening Teams" that you can use to begin your journey towards reopening.

In addition, you should begin to:

1. Collect necessary supplies
2. Clean the building
3. Develop crucial plans
4. Communicate with your congregation members, and
5. Work toward certification for reopening

STAGE TWO: PREPARATION

Below are requirements that churches must prepare for in order to resume in-person worship after receiving permission:

1. Churches should continue to maintain an online worship service presence and connection through livestreaming, ZOOM meetings, video services, etc.

2. Persons in the vulnerable category of 65 and older or those who live with persons who fit into that category, should be encouraged to remain home and take advantage of online worship experiences.

3. Persons who have significant pre-existing conditions should also be encouraged to remain at home.

4. Cloth masks will be worn by all participants while in church. The face coverings need not be surgical masks or N-95 respirators; these critical supplies must continue to be reserved for healthcare workers and other medical first responders.

   Cloth face coverings should not be placed on young children under the age of two, anyone who has trouble breathing, or anyone who is unable to remove the mask without assistance (these persons should remain home at this time).

5. Holy Communion through intinction or with the use of individual cups/bread will not be administered in person until the threat of transmission is minimized. Proximity to those administering and those receiving communion pose an increased risk. Pre-made, self-service communion cups (with bread inside the flap) may be used if made available upon entry. This, however, will cause an increased burden on the cleaning of the sanctuary and may not be possible if multiple services are being conducted requiring thorough cleaning in-between services. Online Communion will still be permitted until such time as we determine when we can re-assemble with no restrictions.

6. Baptisms should be delayed until the restrictions are lifted to ensure safety of the families and the person being baptized.

7. Use “no-touch” alternatives with:

   - **Passing the Peace;**
   - **Collection of the offerings;**
   - **Use of Ushers/Greeters (these positions should not be used at this time) and;**
   - **Use of printed materials**

   In addition, all Bibles and hymnbooks should be removed from the sanctuary. Congregants will be allowed to bring their own Bibles. Bulletins should not be passed out, but made available upon entry. Bulletins should not be re-used. And Coffee/Fellowship hours should be suspended until further notice.

STAGE TWO: PREPARATION (continued)

8. Choirs and the use of praise bands should be suspended until further notice. The use of soloists is allowed, but only with proper social distancing.
9. Congregational singing should not be conducted until further notice.
10. Seating should be restricted to every other pew. Alternate pews should be roped off to ensure socialdistancing.
11. Families who live in the same household should sit together; this includes youth and children.
12. Children's moments may still be a part of worship. However, children should remain with their families while the children's message is being delivered. No handouts will be permitted.
13. Microphones should not be passed or shared during the service for any reason, for the sharing of joys and concerns, announcements, etc.
14. Elimination of a receiving line to greet persons exiting the sanctuary.
15. Great care, planning, and intentionality should be exercised for the creation of shorter services with no liturgical music and spoken hymns while remaining masked.
16. Altar calls and the "laying on of hands" are not allowed as they present a challenge to proper social distancing. Alternatives for providing pastoral care "in the moment" will need to be carefully discerned.
17. Drive-in and outdoor worship experiences are permitted as long as proper social distancing is established and maintained at all times. No one should leave their vehicles for any reason before, during, or after drive-in worship services.
18. If your sanctuary cannot accommodate the gathered congregation using these strict guidelines, consideration will need to be made for multiple, staggered worship services to be conducted. Plans will need to be made for sanitation of the sanctuary between services, and a mechanism will need to be created for who should attend a given service at the appointed time.

Requirements for Small Groups, Sunday School, Bible Study, etc.

1. Continue to offer and encourage participation in online groups to maintain ministry to the most vulnerable population and provide ongoing opportunity for those who still feel uncomfortable with in-person gatherings.
2. Establish and maintain the same principles as stated above for every small group gathering.
3. In-person meetings should be restricted to a five-person limit.

STAGE TWO: PREPARATION (continued)

Requirements for Weddings and Funerals

1. In a limited reopening, weddings and funerals could be conducted once again in our facilities utilizing the social distancing and precautionary measures outlined in this document.
2. Receiving lines and greeting of family members are prohibited. "No touch" alternatives will need to be clearly explained and utilized.

Requirements for Youth/Children's Ministries

1. There should be no organized sports, camps, or other activities that do not honor social distancing guidelines.
2. Youth should remain with their families before, during, and after worship services.
3. Playgrounds and other outside spaces should be closed to children and youth during this limited reopening.
4. Youth ministry coordinators/leaders should use technology as much as possible to encourage online gatherings.
5. Any in-person activities should take great care to not violate social distancing guidelines. In addition, a thorough cleaning of the space must occur once the activity has ended.
6. Additional areas which should be considered:
    - Care for the mental health/anxiety of our youth should be considered in planning for opportunities for youth to interact within social distanced parameters.
    - Many youth have missed milestone events–proms, graduations, and end of the year awards ceremonies. The church's recognition of these milestone events is important.

For other creative ideas and support, please contact our Conference Youth Coordinator, Jenna Johnson, at jjohnson@nyac.com

Requirements for Other Activities

- Vacation Bible Schools should be suspended for the summer.
- Mission trips which involve travel should also be cancelled. Working locally with essential ministry missions, food pantries, homeless shelters, and other ministries that need volunteers is encouraged with proper sanitation and social distancing.
- Any fund-raising or social activities that involves food preparation and distribution should be cancelled. This would especially include fund-raising dinners, covered-dish dinners, or food distribution through buffets. We have documented illustrations that volunteerism in these activities has created breeding grounds for the transmission of the virus.

STAGE TWO: PREPARATION (continued)

Requirements for Church Office Usage

1. Regular office hours can be resumed with the following considerations:
   - Churches with a small staff can re-assemble using social distancing and safety measures, such masks and regular handwashing.
   - Churches with larger teams of staff should consider staggered work hours to limit the number of people in the building at one time. Also, office space should be sanitized and thoroughly cleaned daily. Shared office spaces must be throroughly cleaned between shifts.
2. Meetings held should be restricted to a five-person limit.

Requirements for those Renting and/or Utilizing our Facilities

1. Renters and others using our facilities would be permitted to resume their activities so long as they comply with the same restrictions, guidelines, and cleaning/sanitation measures outlined in this document.
2. Negligence or non-compliance with these measures opens the door for the potential spread of the virus and to potential liability issues with insurance carriers. Non-compliance should be immediately addressed and rectified.

Specific Guidance for Child Care Programs

The CDC is clear about the reality and the precautions related to the reopening of child care programs:

1. Reopening child care programs helps parents and guardians return to work.
2. In communities with significant mitigation problems, child care programs should remain closed, but specific programs may choose to remain open to serve children of essential workers.
3. The following are steps to be undertaken before any child care program is reopened:
   - Communicate with local and state authorities to determine current mitigation levels.
   - Take extra precautions to protect staff, children, and family members who are at a higher risk of vulnerability.
   - Ensure that any other groups that use church facilities also follow strict guidelines for cleaning and safety protocols outlined in this document.
   - Specific and intentional sanitation measures include: Hand washing and covering coughs and sneezes among children and staff; face masks should be worn at all times among all staff; and ample supplies of soap, hand sanitizer with 60% alcohol, and tissues must be established and maintained.
   - Encourage sick staff to stay home and encourage parents to keep sick children at home.

STAGE TWO: PREPARATION (continued)

Specific Guidamce for Child Care Programs
(continued)

The following are steps that need to be undertaken after the child-care program is reopened:

- Screen children upon arrival. Establish a routine of daily health checks on arrival, such as temperature screening for both staff and children.

- Clean, sanitize, and disinfect railings, frequently touch-esurfaces (door handles, toys, sink handles, drinking fountains, etc.) multiple times each day. Create and ensure adequate ventilation of the space.

- Ensure that classes include the same group of children each day and that the same child care providers remain with the same group. Restrict mixing between groups.

- Cancel all field trips.

- Restrict non-essential visitors, volunteers, and activities (including parental visits except for drop-off and pick-up).

- Maintain social distancing in all seating and bedding.

- Stagger arrival and drop-off times.

- If feeding occurs, serve meals in the classrooms instead of a group dining area and limit the use of shared serving utensils. Use of pre-packaged boxes or bags is recommended.

- Keep each child's belongings separated and in individually labeled storage containers.

- Minimize sharing of high touch materials (art supplies, equipment, electronic devices, toys, books, games, and other learning aids).

- Avoid immediate contact such as shaking or holding hands, hugging, or kissing.

- Make sure that all staff are trained in the procedures and precautions outlined in this document.

STAGE THREE: PERMISSION

These are practices that will be allowed once permission is given to resume limited/restricted in-person worship and other activities

The process to reopen our churches for ministry begins when the government leadership of your region gives permission to begin reopening.

For churches in New York: when your region enters Phase Four. For churches in Connecticut: when the governor grants permission to begin the reopening phase. The District Superintendent gives permission for your church building to reopen.

To have permission to reopen, your church must do the following:

- Complete the "Worksheet for Protocol Planning and Reopening Teams."
- Ensure your Protocol Planning and Reopening Team meets the reopening requirements.
- Submit the worksheet with the documented plans to your District Superintendent.
- Submit the signed church certification to your District Superintendent.

District Superintendent Requirements

After reviewing and approving your church's reopening plans, your District Superintendent can give permission to reopen and issue a reopening badge to be displayed in your outward-facing windows, entry-way doors and website homepage. This badge lets members, visitors, and building users know your church has prepared the building, its people, and met the requirements to safely receive them into the building.

STAGE THREE: PERMISSION (continued)

The Sequence for Reopening

Bishop Bickerton will announce the date for entry into this next stage.

1. District Superintendents utilizing the Cooperative Parish Coordinators, will announce the date for the limited reopening.
2. District Superintendents will create a database for each congregation's plans moving into this stage. Some congregations may not feel comfortable moving into this stage at the appointed time. In such instances you must be prepared to begin or maintain online worship and ministry.

   Some pastors who are in a category of vulnerability, may not feel comfortable moving into this stage. Appropriate measures for online worship and ministry alternatives will need to be put into place. Coverage for in-person worship will also need to be negotiated with the District Superintendent, if the congregation wishes to resume in-person activity.

   Activity within Stage Three will be maintained until an announcement is issued noting our move into the next stage of our operations.

   Detailed guidelines for the next phase will be released at the appropriate time with ample notice for implementation.

5 Conclusion

It will not be an easy undertaking to reopen your church for worship and other activities. It will take much planning and preparation that will extend for weeks before you are adequately prepared.

We are encouraging you to form your Protocol Planning/Reopening Team immediately. There is much to think about and much more to do. Throughout you must remember that this is not a time to cut corners, look for loopholes, or avoid necessary precautions. **To only perform some of these functions eliminates the effectiveness of any measure taken.**

In summary there are critical areas of emphasis that must be cared for in this process:

- Attention to and care for vulnerable individuals.
- Creation and maintenance of social distancing measures.
- Restricting physical contact.
- High levels of sanitation and cleaning.
- Maintenance of a high level of online activity by offering an online worship presence and ZOOM internet meetings.
- Cancellation of certain activities (VBS, mission trips, fellowship meals, fund-raising dinners, nurseries during worship, etc.) for the foreseeable future.

Where's the Hope?

The bulk of this communication is centered upon the stark reality that there will be much preparation and hard work to be accomplished both before we can re-assemble and when we actually open the doors once again for in-person worship and ministry.

These intentional steps highlight the magnitude of the problem before us -and the depth of work it will take before we can re-open. In the midst of all of these requirements, it's very easy to cry out, "Where's the hope?"

Listen to these faithful reminders:

- "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth." (Psalm 124: 8)

- "My hope is built on nothing less, than Jesus blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus name! When darkness veils his lovely face, I rest on his unchanging grace. In every high and stormy gale my anchor holds within the veil. His oath, his covenant, his blood support me in the whelming flood. When all around my soul gives way, he then is all my hope and stay." (Edward Mote, 1834)

- "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God." (Psalm 42:11).

We've done this before. Time and again throughout human history, God's people have felt the presence of God, have seen God at work, and responded with extraordinary faithfulness. We can do this. There is great creativity, love, respect and determination in the lay and clergy of this Annual Conference. This is our time to demonstrate our faith by rising up and meeting the challenge that is before us.

What lies in front of us can and should be seen as a chance to truly create a "new norm" for us as God's people. It could be argued that what we have been is not who we were intended to be. For years we have been in decline. We have lost our passion for those who do not embrace faith as a norm. We have, at times, lost our cutting edge for that which is truly impactful and needed. This is our best opportunity to re-think about what is essential in the ministry of our church. The time has never been more ripe for renewal and revival in God's church. Where's the hope? It's all around us if only we dare to believe.

A Final Word

As leaders, we must commit ourselves to helping everyone understand that a reopening plan is not designed to go back to the way we were before but to discover the "new normal" of what we must become. The issue is not whether or not we can/should change. Rather, the issue is how we must change in order to properly care for the people under our care.

Our founder, John Wesley, was a brilliant person. He not only struggled but successfully moved from his current situation to the new reality of taking the gospel message from the pulpit into the streets and among the poor and marginalized. He was not only interested in the salvation of the soul but was also consumed with taking care of the physical body so that life could be lived to the fullest.

His understanding of God's intention for humanity was one that not only required deep faith in the mystery of God's grace but also serious practices that helped people take responsibility for their own actions. It was an inclusive practice of personal and social holiness all designed to demonstrate deep love and belief in God and deep love and responsibility for one another. John Wesley once said,

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 you ever can.

As we walk through these uncertain days and as we plan to bear witness to what we believe in the intentional measures of reopening our churches, may Mr. Wesley's words guide our path each step of the way.

Church Compliance Certification

Dear Church Leaders,

As we plan to reopen our churches, it is absolutely critical that the guidelines and requirements that we have issued be widely communicated, well understood and complied with at each and every one of our churches.

We therefore are asking you to certify the following:

- We have received, read and understand the guidelines and requirements issued by the bishop with respect to the reopening of churches.
- We have distributed these documents to all members of our Church Council.
- We understand that compliance with these requirements is a life and death matter and must be taken extremely seriously.
- We will implement the required measures needed to ensure a safe environment in all spaces where members, outside groups and staff may be present.
- If we encounter obstacles to implementing these measures, we will prioritize safety over in-person gatherings and will immediately consult with the District Superintendent for advice.
- We will promptly report any new outbreaks of Covid-19 within the congregation, outside groups and staff to the District Superintendent
- We will ensure that our church is in compliance with all protocols for child care and preschool activities and settings.
- We have completed the "Worksheet for Protocol Planning and Reopening Teams" and have attached all referenced plans to this certification.
- We will complete the NYAC "Checklist for Worship Events" for each in-person worship event we host and keep the checklist on file in the church office.

_____ _____ _____
Signature of Pastor Date Church Name

_____ _____
Signature of Trustees Chair Date

_____ _____
Signature of Church Council Chair Date

Worksheet for Protocol Planning and Reopening Teams

What is your inventory of essential supplies?

- ☐ Cleaning supplies
- ☐ Masks (ample supplies should be available for those who arrive without them)
- ☐ Hand sanitizer (with at least 60% alcohol)
- ☐ Soap
- ☐ Toilet Paper
- ☐ Cleansing wipes
- ☐ Tissues
- ☐ No-touch trash cans

Identify clearly named and trained "Cleaning Teams."

- ☐ Develop your cleaning plan and place special emphasis on pews/chairs, doorknobs, railings, bathrooms and other high-touch areas.
- ☐ Make arrangements for professional deep cleaning of carpeting and other flooring prior to re-entry.

Determine appropriate and clearly identified paths of entry and exit.

- ☐ Calculate how many people your worship space can hold if every other pew is utilized and congregants are sitting in family groups six feet apart from one another.
- ☐ Create a plan for capping attendance when/if the sanctuary/worship space reaches 50 percent capacity.
- ☐ Establish a plan to handle any parishioner who wishes to participate in worship without a mask and those who refuse to wear a mask and people who don't cooperate with social distancing.
- ☐ Make sure that ventilation systems operate properly and increase circulation of outdoor air.

Create/purchase signage that explains the following:

- ☐ How to stop the spread of Covid-19.
- ☐ Everyday protective measures such as hand washing, covering coughs and sneezing, properly wearing a face covering, and social distancing.

Determine how you would handle a variety of specific circumstances by taking the following steps

- ☐ Develop a clearly communicated plan for building use agreements to reflect the results of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- ☐ Contact your local insurance carrier in order gain guidance on how to remain in compliance with their expectations, cautions, and potential restrictions.
- ☐ Develop a plan for clearly communicating the restrictions/guidelines to all members of your congregation as well as to those who utilize the building.
- ☐ Develop a plan for how you will communicate with the members of the congregation if someone develops Covid-19.
- ☐ Consider conducting a survey of the congregation to determine the degree and under what circumstances the members would feel comfortable returning to in-person worship.
- ☐ Develop a plan for taking attendance of those present for the purpose of being able to track if someone were to become sick or exposed.
- ☐ Work with your leadership team to develop a plan for providing intentional spiritual and emotional care as well as counseling on a flexible, in person rotation or virtual basis. This would also require that you create a credible listing of print and in-person referrals.
- ☐ Enhance your awareness of parishioners and others in your community in need of food, medicine, and mental health support as a result of the pandemic. Also, be aware of the rise of domestic violence in all of our regions.

Determine a plan for collection of the offering, including such things as:

- ☐ A stationary collection box
- ☐ Mail-in offerings
- ☐ Electronic giving (contact the NYAC Treasurer, Ross Williams at rwilliams@nyac.com for assistance and information).

Develop a plan for counting the offering including such things as:

- ☐ Gloves
- ☐ Disinfectants
- ☐ Deposit time frames with consideration of leaving the offering in a box for 2-3 days to reduce the risk of transmission.

New York Annual Conference
WORSHIP CHECKLIST

Version 1
May 15, 2020

This checklist shall be completed before each worship event and placed in a file maintained by the church office. You must check nyac.com frequently to ensure that you have the most recent guidelines and checklist. In situations that require clarification, refer to the most recent update of the NYAC guidelines and/or contact your District Superintendent.

Name of Church _____

Person(s) Completing this Form _____

Date of Event _____

Type of Event ☐ Regular Sunday/Weekend Service ☐ Wedding ☐ Funeral/Memorial
Including, ☐ ~~Baptism~~ (as of 5/15/20, baptisms are suspended) ☐ Communion (see section V)

I. General

☐ District Superintendent has approved congregation's plan
☐ Online worship presence is offered
☐ Plans related to these NYAC Guidelines have been clearly communicated and signs are posted to assist participants' understanding of healthy practices.
☐ Care has been taken to identify and communicate with the following:
- Persons who are feeling sick or have a positive diagnosis with Covid-19 are told to stay home.
- Those who are in vulnerable age categories, live with vulnerable persons, or have pre-existing medical conditions are encouraged to stay home.
- Cloth face coverings should not be placed on young children under age 2, anyone who has trouble breathing, or anyone who is unable to remove the mask without assistance (these persons should remain home at this time).

☐ Attendance must be taken and attached to this form so that members can be informed if any attendees develop Covid-19

II. Sanitation/cleaning

☐ Public spaces have been properly sanitized (especially high-touch places like railings, door handles, pews/chairs, restrooms, etc.)
☐ Hymnals and Bibles have been removed from pews
☐ Carpets/flooring have been deep-cleaned since 3/15/20
☐ Hand sanitizer is made available (at least 60% alcohol)
☐ Restrooms are fully stocked with soap, toilet paper and hand towels/driers
Only no-touch trash cans are in use
Doors and windows are left open when feasible to encourage air circulation

New York Annual Conference
WORSHIP CHECKLIST
(Continued)

III. Social Distancing/"No-touch" protocols

- ☐ Masks are to be worn at all times by everyone present. Church will provide masks to those who do not have them.
- ☐ Seating should be restricted to every other pew. Alternative pews should be roped off to ensure social distancing. Families who live in the same household should sit together. This includes youth and children.
- ☐ Plans for entry and exit are clearly communicated/marked.
- ☐ Capacity has been determined for worship space and plan is in place for how to cap attendance when/if the sanctuary/worship space reaches appropriate social distancing capacity.
- ☐ Offering is collected in a no-touch manner (for example, stationary collection box, online giving, text giving, mailed checks).
- ☐ Offering is counted and deposited in an appropriate and safe way.
- ☐ Passing of the Peace is excluded or conducted in a way that preserves social distancing.
- ☐ If Children's moment is to be a part of worship, children should remain with their families and no handouts will be permitted.
- ☐ Bulletins and other print materials are not handed out, but available for pick-up, printed in individual homes or placed in seats prior to the event.
- ☐ Microphones are not shared.

IV. Suspended activities

- ☐ Choir singing/praise bands will not rehearse or be included in the event (soloists and instrumentalists are allowed, as long as social distancing is observed).
- ☐ Baptisms will not be conducted at this time.
- ☐ Congregational singing will not happen.
- ☐ Receiving lines following the service are prohibited.
- ☐ No fellowship/social hour, reception or meal will take place on the church property.
- ☐ Activities of the Ushers/greeters are suspended.
- ☐ Altar calls and the "laying on of hands" are discouraged as they present a challenge to proper social distancing. Alternatives for providing pastoral care "in the moment" will need to be carefully discerned.

V. Holy Communion (if celebrated during this worship service)

- ☐ Holy Communion through intinction or with the use of individual cups/bread will not be administered in person until the threat of transmission is minimized. Proximity to those administering and those receiving communion poses an increased risk. Pre-made, self-service communion cups (with bread inside the flap) may be utilized if made available upon entry. This, however, will cause an increased burden on the cleaning of the sanctuary and may not be possible if multiple services are being conducted requiring thorough cleaning in between services. Online Communion will still be permitted until such time as we determine when we can re-assemble with no restrictions.

New York Annual Conference
WORSHIP CHECKLIST
(Continued)

VI. Additional Precautions that have been cared for (please list):

Doing Pastoral Ministry During Covid-19

While nearly every time is challenging to be a pastor, the current pandemic has made pastoring an even greater challenge. However, with challenges come opportunities. As old ways of pastoring are being eliminated or restricted, we need to be open to creating and embracing new ways of pastoring. Below are some suggestions for how to shepherd a congregation (including ourselves) during this dangerous and life-changing time in history.

Bishop Bickerton wrote in his most recent guidance on reopening our churches: "We must keep in mind that we have a theological mandate to care for one another holistically in body, mind, and spirit. We also serve a large population base that has either been disproportionately affected or is at a higher risk of infection than others."

Leadership

- **Be a Non-Anxious Presence.** Note that pandemic and panic have the same root word in Greek (pan = all). This is a time of heightened fear and uncertainty. Your job is to not panic and be a non-anxious presence to help calm the fears and anxieties your people are likely experiencing.
- **Focus on Faith rather than Fear.** This is a corollary to being non-anxious. During a time of crisis, a calm and steady faith in God and God's love is what will get us through. Part of overcoming fears is to name them and be honest about them. Helping people give voice to their fears is a first step to dealing with them.
- **Lead by Your Values.** While there is a plethora of medical guidance and information everywhere, our values of love, hope, and faith are the motivation for why we do what we do. Remind yourself and your people of your "why" for living how we live. This is especially the time for living and preaching about self-giving love. We wear masks and socially distance because it is an act of self-giving love.
- **Lead With Gratitude.** This is a time to express gratitude for big and small things people are doing. Prayers should include thanksgiving for those who are risking their lives for us: first responders, health care workers and essential workers. Look for opportunities to thank persons in your congregation for anything they are doing that is helping.
- **Keep Current With and Follow Health Guidance.** As a leader, you can model those acts of love that keep us safe: wearing a mask when in a public place, social distancing, staying at home when feeling ill. Staying healthy yourself is very important.
- **Follow Smart Guidelines As You Re-Open Your Church.** This is not a time to take risks. This is a time for being safe and smart. While many will want to rush back to in-person worship, there are many crucial steps that must be taken before you church is ready to reopen.

Pastoral Care

- **Be Creative.** Due to stay-at-home orders, we need to be creative about doing pastoral care. In-person pastoral care is difficult, if not impossible, especially with persons in the vulnerable category (over 65 or having underlying health issues). This is a time for embracing 21st century technology: Zoom and Facetime are available for video calls. If the person needing pastoral care can't use these, there is the old-fashioned phone call, text or email.

- **Stay Connected with Your People.** Even if we can't visit our people in person, we still need to be there for them. This means lots of checking in by the new technologies mentioned above, or by phone or email. Persons who don't normally need pastoral care will now need pastoral care. Pay attention to what you are hearing and seeing in your virtual visits with them. It's really important to listen to the "music behind the words" to assess how they are really doing.

- **Healthy Practices.** Pay attention to your own health. Make sure you are getting regular exercise, eating healthy and getting good sleep. Again, you are modeling a healthy body, mind and spirit Be sure to take time off and, especially, take a weekly Sabbath day of rest and renewal

- **Intentionally schedule your pastoral respite** on June 11-14, 2020 as a time for rest and renewal.

Small Group Ministry

- **Try New Kinds of Groups.** While traditional Bible studies and prayer groups can easily be moved online, why not try out something new? One church One church offers an online online meditation group that uses guided faith-based meditations. Another church is offering a "happy hour" of socializing. There are so many different possibilities for keeping small groups connected.

- **Transform Church Meetings.** While online church committee and church council meetings usually focus on church business, these meetings can matter more if some time is set aside for checking in and prayer. Give these meetings a spiritual purpose rather than a church business purpose.

Self Care

- **Modeling self care for your people is part of being a leader.** While we usually associate exercise with physical effort, pay attention to how you "exercise" your mind and spirit. Take time to read things you wouldn't normally read as a way of exercising your mind. Try out some new forms of spiritual practice as a way of keeping fresh and healthy (i.e. prayer walk, mindfulness hike).

- **Give thanks for the small and large things in your life that are good.** In any and every circumstance, express thanksgiving. Modeling a life of gratitude will inspire and motivate your people to do the same.

INSIGHT FROM NEW YORK AND CONNECTICUT STATE GOVERNMENTS

New York State

Governor Cuomo has issued the following PHASE-IN plan for reopening:

- **Phase 1:** Construction, Manufacturing, & select retail with curb-side pick-up will be allowed when the seven-step metrics (below) are met. The ability to move to the next phase will be determined by "Control Rooms" that are being established in each region.
- **Phase 2:** Professional services, retail, real estate, and finance.
- **Phase 3:** Restaurants and hotels.
- **Phase 4:** Arts, recreation, and education.

Each of these groups must produce a plan to ensure employee and customer safety based on CDC guidlines.

Business precautions that must be cared for are as follows:

- Workplace hours must be adjusted to reduce density.
- Enact social distancing policies.
- Non-essential travel for employees will be restricted.
- All employees and customers will be required to wear masks.
- Strict cleaning and sanitation standards will be implemented.
- Enact a continuous health screening process for individuals to enter the workplace.
- Tracing, tracking, and reporting of cases will continue.
- Liability processes must be developed.

The state has also released a tracking page for each region with regard to meeting reopening metrics. Those metrics are based on the following:

1. 14-day decline in hospitalizations or under 15 new hospitalizations (3-day average).
2. 14 Day decline in hospital deaths or fewer than 5 deaths (3-day average).
3. New hospitalizations (under 2 per 100,000 residents – 3 day rolling average).
4. Share of total beds available (threshold of 30%).
5. Share of ICU beds available (threshold of 30%)
6. 30 per 1,000 residents tested monthly (7-day average of new tests per day).
7. At east 30 contact tracers per 100,000 residents.

Currently, as of May, 8, no region has met the requirements to open. In addition, as of the printing of this document, faith communities have not been described in the reopening plan. For purposes related to our United Methodist churches, it is our determination that the earliest any churches within the three New York regions could re-open would be within Phase 3 for churches that worship less than 50 persons and Phase 4 for all others

INSIGHT FROM NEW YORK AND CONNECTICUT STATE GOVERNMENTS

State of Connecticut

Governor Lamont and the State of Connecticut has also issued the following reopening plan for May 20:

- Restaurants (outdoor only)
- Retail
- Offices (continuing to work from home where possible)
- Personal services (hair and nail only)
- Museums, Zoos (outdoor only)
- Outdoor recreation (camping, mountain biking, etc.)
- University research programs.
- Churches that worship less than 50 persons would be permitted to re-open on June 7th (when the CDC Guidelines have been met and a plan for adherence to those guidelines has been established and approved).

Connecticut has also issued criteria for Initial Reopening. Those include the following:

1. 14-day decline in hospitalizations.
2. Increased testing available.
3. Sufficient contact tracing capacity.
4. Protection of high-risk populations.
5. Adequate healthcare capacity.
6. Adequate supply of PPE
7. Appropriate physical distancing regulations.

This document relies on information from the following sources:

CDC Business Plan Guidelines: www.documentcloud.org/documents/6883734-CDC-Business-Plans.html

24 Questions Your Church Should Answer before People Return, Ken Braddy, April 18, 2020.

Returning to Church – Ministry during the Covid-19 Outbreak, The Wisconsin Council of Churches

Regional Guidelines for Reopening New York, New York State Government website.

Criteria for Initial Reopening, State of Connecticut Government website.

Document from the Upstate New York Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

NY Forward: A Guide to Reopening New York & Building Back Better published by the State of New York.