

Frequently Asked Questions  
Church Re-opening Guidelines  
New York Annual Conference  
Volume I  
May 27, 2020

**Pastoral Concerns**

1. What are we saying regarding those who are in the vulnerable category of 65 and older?  
Those in the 65 and older category, based on the direction of the Centers for Disease Control, should be encouraged to remain at home until we work through the initial church re-opening phase. If a person in that vulnerable category wishes to attend services, they should not be prohibited. Our role is simply to caution them of their potential risks and encourage them to remain home and continue to take advantage of online services.
  
2. What if the pastor or the lay leaders are over 65 or have any pre-existing conditions?  
None of our leaders are mandated to lead services once permission is given. If a pastor expresses a need to remain home and her/his local church wishes to remain open, the pastor will need to negotiate with the District Superintendent to provide “on-site” coverage. There will be no pressure or consequences placed upon a pastor in a vulnerable category or with a pre-existing condition to return to on-site worship if they do not wish to do so.
  
3. What if our church doesn't feel comfortable reopening even when permission is given?  
This needs to be carefully negotiated with the leadership of the local church utilizing the consultation of the District Superintendent. A local church will not be forced to reopen if it feels uncomfortable doing so, however online worship, studies, small groups, etc. should be maintained as an offering while the church remains closed and even after it chooses to reopen.
  
4. What should we do if we are at social distancing capacity and others arrive for worship?  
The local church “Protocol Planning & Reopening Team” will need to determine ahead of time what the seating capacity is for their local setting (every other pew -- families sitting together -- six feet apart from other participants in each pew). We estimate that this will be 35-40% capacity at a maximum.

Once this has been determined, when maximum capacity is reached and others come, they should gracefully be asked to either, return for the next service (if multiple services are being offered), or tune into the online worship experience. If there are other rooms that have been properly prepared (using the guidelines), they could be ushered to those spaces (utilizing speakers or closed-circuit television). The services should not be dismissed if capacity has been reached.

For those that have larger numbers in worship, a creative idea may be to take advance registrations for those wishing to attend.

Each local church will need to address this issue as it relates to their particular context and need.

5. Will the Covid-19 Guidelines book be available in print and in multiple languages?  
The English version of the guidelines, along with the various worksheets/checklists, will be sent directly to each local church this Thursday evening, May 28<sup>th</sup>. The guideline booklet is currently being translated into Korean and Spanish and will be made available once this work is completed.

### Compliance Concerns

- I. Should restrooms be open?  
If possible, yes, but only with strict adherence to the guidelines and opportunities provided for multiple cleanings throughout the time that the building is open.
2. Can family members sit together?  
Yes. It is our assumption that they are already having contact with one another at home (see #11, page 8 of the guidelines document).
3. What about the new role of greeters and ushers?  
These persons have played a key role in the life of our churches for years. They are most often the first wave of contact that a person has when they enter worship. Ushers and greeters should be well trained to assume a new function in this gradual reopening phase. They are the ones who should make a bulletin available to a person upon entering, direct them to open seating, instruct them about the new entry/exit procedures, ensure that all persons have a mask and are wearing it, and make sure that everyone understands the new protocols. It would be helpful if a church would provide a simple, one-page document that explains the protocols and could be provided by an usher and/or greeter at the time of entry. If multiple ushers/greeters are used, they too need to demonstrate appropriate social distancing and wear a mask.

Anyone who is exhibiting symptoms should be encouraged to not participate and seek further testing in order to ensure their safety and the safety of others.

4. Can cleaning before and after services be done by volunteers or should they all be professionals?  
Before the official reopening takes place, it would be important to consider bringing in a professional service to clean the floors, padded pews, etc. After this, the local church should secure the services of dedicated laity from the church to be a part of a “cleaning team.” (see pages 17-18 of the **Covid-19 Guidelines for Church Reopening**)

To seek professional services to clean following each service would be, in all likelihood, too expensive. To secure committed and well-trained laity to assume this responsibility will take great amounts of commitment and intentionality and will be one of the most difficult parts of securing a successful reopening plan and procedure.

As we continue to offer extreme hospitality to our people, offering a space that has been thoroughly cleaned and sanitized (based on the guidelines) will go far in establishing trust and a sense of peace for all who attend.

5. When can we begin to see individual parishioners in the pastor's office?

As of May 27, in the State of Connecticut, professional counseling services can take place with groups of less than five (5) present. In the State of New York, "professional services" cannot take place until the beginning of Phase Two (May 30 for the Southern Tier & Mohawk regions, June 3 for the Capital Region, June 9 for the Mid-Hudson region, and June 10 for the Long Island Region. There is no date set yet for the New York region.).

Once again, strict adherence to the regular cleaning of each space before and after use as well as social distancing and wearing of masks must be followed. Regular safe sanctuary and other safety precautions should continue to be observed as well.

6. Should pastors and other worship leaders be tested for the virus and/or antibodies? Is this required?

At this point, there is a priority list for those who can be tested. Eventually, everyone should be tested but this is not a requirement from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) or for any stage of our reopening guidelines.

As stated above, anyone who is exhibiting symptoms should be encouraged to not participate and seek further testing in order to ensure their safety and the safety of others.

7. Would you encourage measuring the temperature for all who come once our church reopens?

This is a practice that has been seen in a variety of settings throughout the course of this pandemic. While it is a good practice and would be considered a safeguard measure, it is not listed as a requirement in the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) or state guidelines.

8. What if someone arrives for worship and doesn't wish to cooperate with the need for wearing a mask or social distancing?

In all matters related to the reopening, there needs to be intentional training AND extreme kindness employed. If someone doesn't wish to be cooperative, those who encounter the person (front door greeter, usher, lay leader, or pastor) should exhibit a non-anxious spirit of grace but be undeterred in their response:

- Politely ask the person to wear one of the masks being provided.
- If they refuse, politely ask them to go outside so that they might listen to the service from a remote location (if possible) or return home and watch the service via the internet.
- If they refuse, explain to them that if they persist the entire worship service will need to be ended so as to not put anyone in potential risk of infection.
- If they refuse, explain the situation to the gathered church, offer a benediction, and dismiss everyone.

We all hope and pray that this type of situation will not arise but to compromise our position is to compromise the health and safety of someone who has come for worship.

9. How are we to do deal with visitors who come when they see the doors open? How do we deal in particular with the homeless and the hungry?

Of course, our doors are always open to visitors. How we approach them is exactly in the same way we approach our regular attenders. The same guidelines apply and they will need to be informed of the limitations placed on everyone who gathers for worship. The creation of a one-page summary of your protocol for worship would be extremely helpful.

We have not required our facilities to be closed to the homeless and hungry throughout the pandemic as they have been identified as “essential services” from the beginning. We have multiple churches that have established very clear social distancing guidelines for the homeless and creative techniques such as “grab and go” for feeding ministries. These essential ministries to poor and homeless are encouraged but they must be done with compliance to the guidelines provided.

10. Are we permitted to have “grab and go” meals for fund-raisers or curbside pickup for meals?

Page 9 of the **Covid-19 Guidelines for Church Reopening states**, “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.”

Some of the most severe cases of virus transmission have taken place in church settings where food preparation and distribution have occurred. We are not professional food handlers thus causing greater risk to transmission of the disease.

11. Should pastors consider putting up plexiglass at the pulpit?

This would be a good idea to consider. If a pastor who is preaching does so in a space that exceeds the six-foot limit, pastors can preach/lead worship without a mask. Masks should be worn by the pastor at all other times.

The use of plexiglass shields would be a good consideration for soloists as well. Once again, the use of praise bands and choirs is not permitted in this reopening stage. Soloists and duets would be the maximum number allowed utilizing extreme care for social distancing.

12. What if we only have one handicap accessible entrance? How will we deal with entry and exit issues?

This will be a matter that will need to be discussed by your Planning and Reopening Team. Great care will need to be exercised in creating a plan that allows for proper social distancing in entry and exit for those who need to utilize the handicap accessible entrance.

13. Are we allowed to offer drive through Communion?

The consideration of drive through communion raises significant issues of liturgy, integrity of the sacrament, and transmission of the elements. How will the elements be consecrated in the presence of the people? How will the liturgy be celebrated and taught? How would the elements be transmitted (use of disposable cups with bread inside the flap are the only means allowed). This issue raises multiple questions and would be discouraged as an option.

### Church Usage Concerns

1. Is there a NYAC protocol for groups that may be considering an on-site retreat at one of our Camps or within the church?

All utilization of our facility at Quinipet has been suspended until further notice. Registrations for the fall are being received by Quinipet and will be evaluated as the time(s) draw closer.

Family camping will be allowed at Kingswood but only with the adherence of strict social distancing guidelines (including wearing masks).

Any gatherings scheduled or anticipated within our local churches should be cancelled until further notice.

2. How do we apply/integrate these guidelines within the context of a Federated Church where a cross section of members are of another denomination or in the usage of the building by outside religious groups/denominations?

If the building is owned by another denomination, usage of that facility would be governed by the denomination. If no guidelines are provided by the parent denomination, we would commend our guidelines to them. Our guidelines have been shared with a wide circle of ecumenical bodies and are currently being reviewed for best practices by many. If the building is owned by The United Methodist Church, adherence to the **Covid-19 Guidelines for Church Reopening** would be required.

Any outside group of any kind who are renting/using our facility must follow the guidelines as they have been established for pre/post sanitation, protocols for usage while they are in the building, creation of checklists to safeguard against liability issues, and attendance so as to provide a baseline for contact tracing if needed.

3. What about groups that use our facility and have anonymity concerns?

The leaders of such groups should sign a compliance sheet (similar to the one provided on page 16 of the **Covid-19 Guidelines for Church Reopening** book) and be required to follow the restrictions and guidelines completely.

4. What if our church has a "Thrift Store" or "Food Pantry?"

Once certification has taken place, a thrift store must comply with all of the guidelines, especially making sure that less than five persons are working in the store and utilizing social distancing, wearing of masks, and frequent hand washing. There should be limits placed on the number of persons allowed in the building at any one time.

The inherent problem with a Thrift Store is the frequent touching of items by multiple persons making sanitation a very real and ongoing concern. This makes insurance liability issues and contact tracing very problematic.

Because of the significant problems associated with these ministries (receiving donations/distributing goods that have been frequently touched), we would discourage the reopening of these ministries for the foreseeable future or until such time as the risk of contagion has been significantly diminished.

Those who are overseeing Food Pantry ministries should re-think their method of ministry and distribution to take into consideration some of the similar problems stated above. The use of “grab and go” bags of canned goods, the distribution of gift cards, and food vouchers should be seriously considered.

5. What about such things as renting our lawn for yoga, day camps, and indoor singing lessons? Using the same principles described both in this FAQ and in the guidelines document, these practices (both indoor and outdoor) should not be restarted or engaged in any of our facilities at this time until further notice.

### **General Questions/Concerns**

1. Is there any insight or guidance on acquiring necessary supplies that will be needed (PPE, hand sanitizer, wipes, etc.)?

We are currently engaged in a robust ecumenical conversation about bulk purchasing and warehousing supplies for distribution. We do not have a solution yet, but we are actively pursuing this concern with other ecumenical partners in both states.

2. Will there be additional financial assistance provided if needed?

We are nearing the point where we will be offering technological grants to our churches who need assistance with internet ministries. These grants will be broken down into three categories – 1) churches who need basic technology, 2) churches who want to upgrade their existing equipment, and 3) churches who are looking for high end upgrades. The application for these grants will become available within the next week.

We continue to monitor giving to the Annual Conference through apportionments, health care, and pensions. We have offered a two-month holiday on pension and health care payments which cost the Annual Conference \$1.2 million. We have not made a final decision on further holidays for pension and health care payments and are doing a thorough examination of our budget and reserves to determine the degree to which we can provide waivers on these payments and other assistance as needs arise within our local churches.

We continue to encourage our churches to do all they can with their apportionments and payment obligation. This connectional obligation enables us to be in ministry throughout the Annual Conference in areas of great need. We pledge to do our part as an Annual Conference and encourage you to do the very best you can in relationship to this as well.

3. *Do you have other thoughts on outdoor and drive-in worship?*

As we have all noticed through extensive media coverage, the permission to gather in outdoor venues invites compromises in the social distancing necessary to limit the spread of the virus. In a church setting, where relationships and personal interaction are always at a high level, the organizing of outdoor experiences provides an unwanted temptation.

Each church should spend these next few weeks in creating a thorough and comprehensive plan for how your church will engage in limited reopening whether indoors or out of doors. Please remember that singing from praise bands and others invites singing by all. Remember too that masks get hot, especially when people are talking and/or singing, thus increasing the temptation to remove them, especially when out of doors. In addition, the same cleansing and sanitation plan that guides the reopening of indoor worship applies for outdoor worship as well.

We are keeping our churches throughout the New York Annual Conference closed until **at least** June 15<sup>th</sup> (depending on the region in which you live) for a reason. We know that in order to follow these guidelines you will need adequate time to acquire supplies, solicit volunteers, train front line personnel, pray and discern the type of abbreviated worship you will provide, and garner the necessary support you will need in order to be successful.

Use this time wisely and intentionally so that when your re-open date is certified by the District Superintendent you will be ready to provide a high quality, safe experience for all who gather whether indoors or outside.

*What if we have further questions?*

- a. Check the [www.nyac.com](http://www.nyac.com) website for up to date.
- b. Register your questions online at [churchreopening@nyac.com](mailto:churchreopening@nyac.com).
- c. Contact your District Superintendent immediately for guidance.