

Suggested Guidelines for Local Church Gatherings in the Fall, 2020

October 29, 2020

Greetings to all in the Missouri Mid-South Conference:

We are now entering the eighth month of living through the COVID-19 pandemic. As your Conference Minister, I give thanks for the ways you have faithfully served God during this difficult and stressful time. Throughout this tenure, I have been impressed with the diligence with which each Church has discerned how to minister through the COVID-19 pandemic. Here are a few examples I celebrate:

- You have developed COVID-response teams with members who share their medical and technical expertise for the health and safety of your church and community.
- You have developed and implemented guidelines regarding when and how you will return to in-person gatherings.
- You have learned how to joyfully worship online using various forms of technology and lots of patience when things go awry!
- You have generously given your money to ensure that your Church will continue to serve the community and each other during this time.
- You have creatively utilized the warm weather to safely gather your church outside for worship, fellowship, and ministry endeavors. Thank you!

Unfortunately, the COVID cases are rising again. This past weekend (October 23-25) there was a national record of 228,264 new cases reported.¹ This document provides three suggested guidelines for all MMS Churches for the Fall, 2020. They are:

1. Suggested Guideline for Immediate Closure of In-Person Worship and Gatherings
2. Suggested Guideline for Development of a Minister's COVID-Preparations Plan
3. Suggested Guideline for Only Virtual Advent and Christmas Services for 2020

Please note that these guidelines are suggestions as I prayerfully respect that each Church must discern for itself what the most appropriate plan of action is for your Church. Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns from the information in these guidelines.

May God's compassionate wisdom renew our spirits as we continue to be the Church through this COVID-19 pandemic. Blessings, Ginny

¹ <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>. Johns Hopkins University. 10-26-20.

Suggested Guideline for Immediate Closure of In-Person Worship and Gatherings

October 29, 2020

As your Conference Minister, I implore you to suspend all in-person worship and gatherings for the near future until there is a decrease in COVID-19 cases in your area.

As the weather has gotten colder, it prevents many from gathering outside as we have this summer and fall. The temptation may be to worship and gather inside the Church building. I strongly discourage this because many church heating systems have poor ventilation systems, which could put members and church staff at risk if they remove their mask.

Already, the Missouri Mid-South Conference has had five Authorized Ministers and one Member in Discernment, who have tested positive and one retired Minister, who has died from COVID-19. For the safety of our ministers, members, church staff, and ministry settings, please consider suspending all in-person gatherings immediately and worship virtually.

Additional Resources:

- [CDC Guidelines for People at Increased Risk](#)
- [CDC Events and Gatherings: Readiness and Planning Tool](#)
- [CDC Guidelines for Coping With Stress](#)

Suggested Guideline for Development of a Minister's COVID-Preparations Plan

October 29, 2020

As COVID-19 cases increase, all ministers would be wise to preemptively develop a plan in case they contract the Coronavirus. This plan prevents expending immense energy while suffering from the onset of COVID. Ministers, I encourage you to prayerfully develop your plan as you discuss these matters with your family, Church Council, and possibly your Church at your earliest convenience. My hope is that you won't have to use this COVID-Preparations Plan, but it is helpful to think through all the questions in advance just in case.

Worship

- If the sole responsibility resides with you:
 - Consider asking an area UCC church that is worshipping virtually if your church can temporarily worship with them online.
 - Consider using MMS All-Staff Worship services or other UCC worship services that can be easily used for the congregation.
- If worship planning is shared among staff or there are ministers in the church:
 - Consider asking the staff to prepare a few worship services in case you need to be absent for a few weeks.
 - Consider asking ministers, who are church members that are able and willing to step in (consider asking them in advance so that they can have a few worship services developed in advance)

Pastoral Care:

- Identify church members, who are willing to call or send notes to members needing support or care.
- Ask ministers who are church members if they would be willing to provide general pastoral care in your absence.

Funerals/Memorial Services:

- Ask one (or multiple) nearby UCC clergy (perhaps those in your cluster group) to officiate any funerals or memorial services if there is a death in your church.
- Talk to the family about considering postponing the memorial service until you recover.

Technology:

- If the sole responsibility resides with you for scheduling zoom meetings and/or live streaming technology:
 - Ask one member comfortable with zoom and/or streaming technology to perform these responsibilities in your absence.
- If a staff member oversees the technology:
 - Make sure there is a member who can serve as that person's back up or liaison in case they have any questions.

Suggested Guideline for Development of a Minister's COVID-Preparations Plan, page 2**Administration:**

- If the sole responsibility resides with you:
 - Consider how your routine responsibilities will be handled in your absence (check mail, answer phone, etc.)
 - If you co-sign checks with the treasurer, make a plan for a substitute signatory.
 - Talk to your Church Council regarding whether they will meet in your absence.
- If you have staff:
 - Consider who will convene staff meetings and regular administrative responsibilities in your absence.
 - Delegate a staff member (if appropriate) to attend the Church Council meeting if they decide to still have their meeting.

Sick Leave and Vacation Paid Time Off (PTO):

- Check to see how much Sick Leave, Vacation, or general Paid Time Off you have remaining (or will have at the beginning of 2021).
- Meet with your Personnel Committee and Church Council regarding your PTO plan especially if you don't have a lot of PTO.
- Save your medical leave for truly crisis situations such as being admitted to the hospital for an extended amount of time.

Communications:

- Write a communication letter if you test positive ahead of time. Give it to your Office Manager with directions of when and how to send it as well as copy your Church Council Moderator.
- Turn off your email while you are sick (just as you would on family leave or vacation). Include an out-of-office message that directs people to a specific contact person such as the Church Council president.
- Change the message on your cell phone and church's voicemails to say that you will be away for a few weeks.
- If you have a regular newsletter or e-newsletter, ask someone to oversee this in your absence. If you are the sole staff member, it's okay to postpone the newsletter in your absence.

Church Council:

- Talk with your Church Council about your plan so that they know what they need to be prepared to handle in your absence.
- It's okay to reduce Church activities in your absence if you are the sole staff.
- Tell them what you expect they will and will not do in your absence (don't make huge decisions that you would normally have input and leadership around).

Suggested Guideline for Development of a Minister's COVID-Preparations Plan, page 3**Personal/Family:**

- Contact your healthcare provider to confirm your coverage on the following:
 - Hospital providers, medical leave, medication and COVID-supply coverage
- Create a family plan for how you will isolate from the rest of your family if they test negative
 - Will your beloved sleep in the same room?
 - Can you use separate bathrooms from other family members?
- Food Preparation
 - How will meals be prepared?
 - What online delivery services are available and have special discounts for continual usage (Door Dash, Uber Eats, and Grub Hub are some delivery services)?
 - Does your grocery store deliver (Shipts delivers for Dierberg)
 - Make sure to put in the comments to leave the meal at the door so that you prevent contact with the delivery person (and make sure to tip generously!).
- Finances
 - If you pay the bills, can you automate your bills so that you don't have to worry about mailing bills while you are sick.
 - Does your family have enough money for incidentals for 2-3 weeks?
 - If you become temporarily financially challenged, please let me know so that I can connect you with the Good Samaritan Fund (overseen by the Deaconess Nurse Ministry) or the UCC Christmas Fund.

Additional Resources:

- [CDC Guidelines If You Have COVID-19](#)
- [CDC Guidelines if You are Caring for Someone with COVID-19](#)
- [CDC Guidelines on When to Quarantine](#)

Suggested Guideline for Only Virtual Advent and Christmas Services for 2020

October 29, 2020

As your Conference Minister, I strongly discourage all in-person worship and gatherings for the Advent and Christmas season this year.

For the month of October alone, Arkansas, Memphis, and Missouri, have experienced record numbers of new COVID cases and deaths, according to Johns Hopkins University data.² Research has shown that a few weeks after a holiday (i.e., Memorial Day, July 4th, and Labor Day), there is an increase in COVID cases reported.³ Since Thanksgiving precedes Advent and Christmas, it is anticipated that December could culminate in more COVID cases and deaths in our communities. For these reasons, as well as the health and well-being of all members, ministers, church staff, and visitors, it is extremely unwise to worship or gather in person during the month of December.

I know that Advent and Christmas seasons provide many traditions that our churches have long held as foundational to our spiritual lives. I also know that if the Church holds these events in person, many members and families, who are physically vulnerable to the Coronavirus will come to Church. In case, ministers and Church Councils are struggling with particular Advent and Christmas events, I offer a chart to specify whether these events can be held in-person or virtually.

<u>Advent and Christmas Events and Worship Gatherings</u>	<u>In-Person</u>	<u>Virtual</u>
Hanging of the Greens	NO	Yes
Caroling	Outdoors	Yes
Christmas Parties	No	Yes
Children's Christmas Pageant	NO	Yes
Choir Cantata	NO	Yes
Candlelit Singing Silent Night	Outdoors	Yes
Christmas Eve	NO	Yes
Christmas Day	No	Yes

This year, I encourage MMS Churches to set aside what we've always done and create new ways to celebrate God's love born anew during Advent and Christmas.

Additional Resources:

[CDC Considerations for Religious Organizations](#)

² <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/region>

³ <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/coronavirus-cases-and-hospitalizations-rise-weeks-after-memorial-day/>
<https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-contact-tracer-cases-are-rising-after-memorial-day-2020-6>