

This is the outline for the presentation hosted (4/30/20) by Bp. Riegel and Pr. Sherri.

RETURNING TO/RE-OPENING CHURCH BUILDINGS

Ultimately, this is a congregation's decision.

Today, we are simply offering guidance: (1) who to listen to; (2) what to do while we wait; (3) considerations of returning/reopening; (4) long-term

Remember, reopening is an option, not a requirement. Reopening well is more important than merely reopening. If one cannot reopen well, one would be better off remaining closed. Reopening well, however, is a matter of balance, taking into account not only the general guidance but also local conditions and capacities.

1) TO WHOM WILL WE LISTEN?

A.) We recommend local authorities, state authorities (governor), and CDC.

- i) Follow the CDC Guidelines for Community and Faith Based Organizations on the CDC Website. See below:
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html>
- ii) Check to see if your state or local governments have tighter restrictions or standards.
- iii) Follow the most restrictive of Federal, state, and local orders.

B.) It's important to data rather than desire. There are so many factors to consider. This virus is still a mystery in many ways. Even through desire to return to worship is strong, we suggest two things...Be honest with yourself and ask what is the real reason folks are wanting to return (fear of irrelevance, fear of families losing interest and not returning, financial concerns – lack of offering); play out worse-case scenario and make sure, if you decide to go back, that you are comfortable living with the consequences should they become a reality for your congregation.

C) Prior to reopening, consult with

- your insurance carrier --- will you be covered if reopening and under what conditions?
- your attorney --- what legal exposure do you have when reopening (especially if someone gets sick) and how do you minimize them?
- The medical professionals in your congregation (doctors, nurses, public health officers, etc.) --- what is their assessment of the risks in your community, in your physical space, among your members, and what would be best practices moving forward?

D) Review your constitution and membership roll so that you know how decisions can be made and who gets a voice in making them.

E) What happens if pastor and council disagree on reopening?

*****It would be best if the council and the pastor were in agreement on whether to reopen and how. That said, it is possible for a difference of opinion to arise. A pastor cannot reopen the church building without the consent of the council. Likewise, a council can reopen the church building without the consent of the pastor. The council, however, cannot engage someone other than the pastor to conduct worship apart from the pastor's advice and consent. Pastors who fall within the vulnerable population category, are advised to follow the applicable guidance for such (just as we advise laity to do so). Likewise, those pastors who are primary caregivers for the vulnerable are advised to follow the applicable guidance. Should an intractable disagreement arise, the parties involved should contact the bishop.*****

3) WHILE WE WAIT...

A) We can't do it all at once like flicking a light switch. Develop a congregational step-by-step plan. That's what we are doing today. Most churches have decided not to open until the end of May or first of June so there is still time to work on a plan.

B) Review, update and implement emergency operations plans. How will you ensure social distancing? Do you have masks on hand for everyone should someone forget theirs? Do you have extras should volunteers show up? Is there enough alcohol gel for people to use? Are your bathrooms stocked with an adequate supply of soap and paper towels dispensers? Do you have posters that you can post throughout the building reminding people of social distancing and in the bathrooms showing proper hand washing protocol? Are you planning on doing temperature checks and sending the person and family home if they test 100.4 degrees or above?

C) Identify key contacts (council, volunteers, paid staff) needed to carry out operations. Who needs to be in the building and when? Be careful how you announce the reopening of office hours. Would it be a good idea to tell people visits to the office are by appointment only? (most of our office staff are in the vulnerable category)

- i) Who will do the volunteer jobs that "at risk" people usually do? Identify necessary volunteers.
- ii) How are the leaders doing? Stress support for leaders.
- iii) Volunteers at the church are also experiencing a new normal. Is there a plan for when quilters resume meeting or the kitchen ladies restart their ministries of feeding? If you offer funeral dinners, how are those handled prior to a vaccine or treatment?

- iv) Will the leadership continue to check on vulnerable members? What is the plan to check-in with those who are vulnerable and (feel they) must shelter in place a while longer? How can you include lay leaders in this work?

D) Set up flexible work hours, sick leave. With the resumption of worship services, your pastor is going to be at a higher risk than most simply because of their exposure to people. Do you have a plan should the pastor or a member of the pastor's immediate family gets sick and they have to go into quarantine often times for at least 6-8 weeks.

E) If pastor, staff, family, members or volunteers are sick, they should be required to stay home.

F) Who is at risk? What is your plan if, after coming together, someone gets COVID-19? How will you alert the Health Department, families and other leaders? If someone who attended worship tests positive, how will you notify the congregation?

G) Decide now to cancel day camp, VBS, mission trips. Can you do something different in their place?

H) Develop a plan for re-integrating outside groups that use the building. When will they be allowed to resume meeting? How do you ensure their compliance with guidelines? What does this mean for your custodians or volunteer cleaners since everything needs to be disinfected after each gathering?

I) Communicate what is happening in the congregation to people so they do not feel left out

J) Review income and budget and develop a financial plan so money does not get too big of a voice.

- i) The plan is a contingency budget with different steps depending on benchmarks of how money comes in.
- ii) Spend rainy day funds before cutting staffing or ministries – This is the time for such as we have been saving. One could argue, it's not just raining, it's pouring!
- iii) Challenge the congregation that, if income exceeds expenses, they will reach out in thankfulness for their abundance. Look around your community and create a list of ministries that are important to support. Contact the synod office and ask if there are other vulnerable congregations on the synod territory that you could help; are there families in your church who need assistance?

- iv) Digital, online, and phone giving is here to stay. Use them. How can we make these resources available to your congregation if you haven't already?

4) RETURNING/REOPENING WILL BE A GRADUAL PROCESS.

A) Take the long view. We have been running a sprint but this is a marathon.

B) Return only when it is safe for your faith family to do so. Please do not feel pressured to return to in-person worship and activities on the first Sunday after the "Stay Home, Stay Safe" order is modified or lifted. Do not return before you are ready.

c) Returning/reopening does not mean the virus is gone. CDC warns this could happen again this fall/winter. Please note: This virus has not gone away with the expectation that it will return in the fall. It is still very active and spreading in our communities. We caution against a false sense of security just because the government says we can reopen. They are more often than not functioning out of desire not data. Pay attention to the scientific experts on this. Testing availability and infection rates matter!

But should it abate and then return, what is the shutdown plan? Have a plan with benchmarks so if you need to close, it does not need to be a debated, emotional decision.

D) Again, we need more testing. We need a vaccine and/or treatment. As ELCA Lutherans, we understand that God works and acts through science.

E) Possible scenarios for return:

- i) Smaller to larger groups – 10, 25, 50, 100, More. Current guidelines vary by locality. As you plan for the return to worship while adhering to the attendance guidelines, there are some things to consider: Who gets to come and when? Will you wait until everyone can gather? Who gets Sunday "prime time"? How do you decide? What do you do about visitors?
- ii) According to guidelines, people under 65 with no underlying health concerns may attend worship. People older than 65 and people with underlying conditions are strongly advised to stay at home. What if the pastor is over 65 or has an underlying condition? What do you do if your pastor is part a clergy couple and they have young children? Please take these things into consideration.
- iii) Regional – Our borders are fluid. Do you want to attract people from other parts of the region who are under guidelines that differ from ours? WV-WMD Synod congregations are bordered by VA, PA, and Ohio. Please

be mindful of what and how you advertise that you are resuming worship. Again, consider how do you will welcome visitors?

F) In-Person and Online.

- i) After you return to worship in the building, what will your balance be between in-person and online worship and activities?
- ii) Please be aware that some may be afraid, unwilling, or prefer not to return. How do you minister to them? There is an underlying pandemic to the pandemic that is in the news. Depression and anxiety have taken hold of some people and will make it very hard for them to feel safe resuming any type of normalcy.
- iii) When, how, or will we invite online worshipers to become in-person worshipers, whether in our congregation or in another congregation? This is a great time to encourage people watching you online to continue supporting their congregations or to seek out an ELCA Lutheran congregation in their own community. If unchurched and local, then we have a great opportunity to invite.
- iv) A lot of you have developed some really neat ways of engaging the congregation online. We need to be honest and ask ourselves if this workload is sustainable for Pastor, staff, and volunteers?

G) Life after we return for worship and other congregational activities

- i) Before and after every gathering in the church building, including the first gathering, the facility needs to be clean and disinfected. Remember to flush the building's plumbing to keep the water fresh.
- ii) Make sure you have appropriate PPE and cleaning supplies for custodial staff who will be cleaning the physical plant.
- iii) Masks:
 - 1.) Everyone wears a mask, even in worship. That means, everyone at all times. Make sure you have masks available for those who may have forgotten their masks and for visitors. Please consult the guidelines for your state/county as the mask guideline may change.
 - 2.) We must wash our masks if they are going to stay at church. Where do they deposit them after completely exiting the building? Who will ensure they are properly laundered and sterilized?

- 3.) If you have quilters in your congregation, ask if they might make masks.
- iv) Keep social distance of 6 feet at all times. Designate spacing in the sanctuary so attendees know where to sit. Family units who live together are allowed to sit together. Please train ushers on protocol for dismissing attendees from worship so social distancing can be observed. Encourage all attendees to exit the building at once following worship as to avoid congregating in narthex or hallways for conversation.
 - v) No handshaking. No hugs. No holding hands during the Lords Prayer.
 - vi) If they wish to acknowledge each other, nodding, bowing, or waving 6 feet away is fine. Conversation is ok as long as social distancing is observed. Always be aware of those around you.
 - vii) Wash hands often or sanitize even at church. Have hand sanitizer available if you can find it.
 - viii) Suspend coffee hour and potlucks until people are ready and eating together can happen safely. Restaurant guidelines are excellent for guiding us through this when we return to this type of fellowship.
 - ix) **Church Nurseries:** It is almost impossible to maintain social distance in church nurseries and to keep them disinfected. Children either need to be welcome or the congregation needs to establish worship services and events where children are welcome. If children attend worship with their families, please seat them with the family unit in which they live and ensure adequate social distancing for the other attendees.
 - x) **WORSHIP** --- Remember: There is a difference between what is necessary in worship and what is good in worship. There are some things that are good under normal conditions which cease to be good under abnormal conditions. Review of the Formula of Concord's discussion on *adiaphora* may prove helpful.
 - 1.) Make sure the sanctuary is set up for Social Distance. People need to sit or stand at least 6 feet apart (alongside, in front, behind – think square). Be aware of your surroundings. Family groups may sit together if they live together.¹

¹ Many of our congregations have members who require assistance. Usually, these individuals fall into the vulnerable population class for other reasons and should be advised to stay home.

- 2.) Again, before and after each worship service, clean and disinfect surfaces and objects that are frequently touched. This means, if you have more than one service on the same day, the worship space as well as entrances/exits and restrooms will need to be cleaned and disinfected between services.
 - 3.) Consider removing hymnals from the worship space and providing the words to hymns and liturgy as inserts.² This is especially important if you will have more than one service on Sundays.
 - 4.) Remove water in the baptismal font if it is the practice of your congregation to provide it for people upon entering the worship space.
 - 5.) Greeters and ushers will have a different (no) role. If ushers will be assisting with worship, please train them on protocol of adhering to social distancing guidelines. This includes how to invite people to communion and dismissal from worship.
- xi) **CHOIR:** The choir must maintain social distance. Suspending choirs until the threat of infection has substantially dropped (vaccine or treatment becomes available) is highly recommended. Singing causes people to expel more water droplets than talking. Masks must be worn if folks are singing.
 - xii) While the verbal formula for the peace remains, the physical exchange of peace is eliminated. There is no need for strange gyrations around this. The pastor says, "The peace of the Lord be with you always." The congregation responds, "And also with you." Move on with the offertory.
 - xiii) Offering plates should not be passed. Offering plates (or boxes) can be put in a location or locations throughout the sanctuary or narthex (but be mindful of security). The offering may be brought forward during the offertory, but this is not necessary. It may be better to recite the offertory without bringing the offering forward, so as not to increase chance for cross contamination and also to provide a way for people to leave their offering after the service in case they forgot to drop it in the box on the way in.
 - xiv) People in the high-risk population might consider staying home. In fact, you should not hesitate to tell some people to stay home. I know that this is a

² This should be unnecessary if there are more than five days between use of the hymnals. It would be safer to use hymnals if more than five days between services than to have staff produce bulletins only two days before without using proper hygiene protocols.

constant concern, those who should stay home in bad weather are those that come. You have a choice: cancel worship for everyone, let them use their own judgment with the understanding that they are adults and accept the consequences, or order them to stay home, using the full authority you have as their pastor, reminding them that they are obligated to obey per Luther's explanation of the fourth commandment. For those who are sick, order them to stay home, reminding them of their duties under the sixth commandment, threatening excommunication and discipline if you have to. In such cases where a parishioner cannot be present, you have extra duty to exercise the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren [and sistren], meaning more phone calls.

xv) Holy Communion --- it is possible to hold worship without Holy Communion. Our older members will remember when quarterly communion was the norm. While not optimal, it may be prudent to reduce frequency if Holy Communion cannot be offered well in your setting. Bp. Satterlee, e.g., has recommended that congregations use Service of the Word until they master social distancing. This seems prudent until we figure out good methods for distribution under these circumstances.

- 1.) Wafers should be used (as wafers require less manipulation).
- 2.) People must be 6 feet apart both in line to receive. Kneeling should be eliminated (as it often involves touching surfaces to get up and down). Allow/expect communion distribution to take longer and plan for it.
- 3.) Communing in one kind is safest. Intinction is the most unsafe. Common cup should not be practiced at this time. Individual glasses are the best option if utraquism (communion" in both kinds") is to be maintained. Prefilled glasses and pouring chalice each pose their own challenges with respect to maintaining hygiene. If using glass rather than disposable plastic, a soak in a weak Clorox solution is recommended.
- 4.) Receiving communion by concomitance (i.e., under one element alone, e.g., the bread only), while rejected as normative practice in the Confessions, is not precluded under certain circumstances---the current circumstances qualify. It is not within our norms to withhold the chalice from the laity, but the laity is not obligated to take it. The greater challenge, given some of our contexts, is whether the chalice may be administered within reasonable concern for safety. In some extreme circumstances, the chalice might be withheld (as is already done in some prison settings). If not intentionally withheld, the recipient is offered the cup, with the words of administration as usual; the recipient may respond, "Amen," and move on without taking of it. If the chalice is withheld, it is only necessary to administer the bread
- 5.) Place wafer in people's hands (after washing/sanitizing hands...gloves may be worn). Do not touch anyone's hands or face. If people are accustomed to receiving bread on their tongues, do not put it in their mouth, put it in their hand.

6.) From preparation through consecration/administration and clean-up, good hygiene protocols should be followed. This may require the retraining of altar guilds and communion assistants---the fewer people involved the better.

xvi) **Pastoral Acts** –Develop a manageable schedule (good pace) for funerals, memorial services, and pastoral acts.

Visitation: Visitation is an important ministry, but, under the current conditions, one should be mindful of safe practices. Remember you are a potential vector for COVID-19. Even if you weren't sick when you started making rounds doesn't mean that you won't pick up something while you are making rounds. As one of the extra complications in this, that the disease may be asymptomatic means we can't just say, I feel fine today. So, if you don't feel fine, stay home. If you do feel fine, think twice. Remember, you don't get martyrdom points for being stupid You certainly don't get them for making someone else sick. A visit -at the door, 6 feet away, with a mask on, appears to comply with current medical advice. Distribution may be made by placing the species on neutral surface. Communion might be taken, in person, to those who are not present, but rigorous hygiene should be maintained, especially given the possible vulnerability of those most likely to receive this ministrations. Taking Communion from the worship service might do both visitor and visited good, but never forget that the teaching of the Gospel (of which preaching is subform) is the primary function of a Lutheran pastor. Even if we cannot or should not commune others, we can still and should still teach the Gospel, engaging, especially, in the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren and sistren. I would go so far as to say that a quick stop to drop off the sacrament without engaging in Gospel conversation, in most cases, indulges a Tridentine understanding of our office.

xvii) Bible Studies/ Faith Formation/ Youth Groups/Other activities

1.) Follow healthy habits (group size, masks, limit the number of people, social distance, be safe, if sick stay home)

2.) When do we start in-person Bible Study? How do we continue to offer on-line resources for Faith Formation? Especially for family teaching faith to kids? When do we start Sunday School? Children's Church?

xviii) Don't overdo it all at once. Be careful and safe. Be patient and gentle with yourselves. Some experts advise people will find returning to the world exhausting.

H) A few more considerations for the Long Term

xix) Four phases of giving: (1) At the beginning of the "stay at home" order congregations may experience an initial bump near normal giving; (2) As this goes on and household budgets become more strained, slowdown and

decline of giving can be expected; (3) Surge as people get back to work and guidelines are relaxed; and (4) new normal, which might be higher or lower than past normal

xx) We need an approach for members who love the church and are grateful to be back and for people who discovered God through our online worship and really don't care about joining the congregation.

- 1.) For members who love the congregation, be transparent about the financial situation. Make sure that whoever communicates about finances to the congregation is positive and upbeat. (Probably not the treasurer or bookkeeper or accountant □).
- 2.) For people more concerned with God than the congregation, tell good news stories about how God (not the congregation) is still working in the world and how the congregation is part of God's work. (God's mission is ongoing. What is our purpose in that mission and how is it being carried out during this time?)
- 3.) Share the things during shelter in place (stay at home) that kept you grounded in God and connected to God's people spiritually.
- 4.) Tell stories of generosity, people with ability who gave more; people who gave not only of their financial resources but also their time and talent. Learn and share their motivations.
- 5.) Talk about how God has connected people to each other and the community during shelter in place.
- 6.) Community Engagement – how have we been supporting the community? How will we continue to support the community? What new insights have we learned about our community in this pandemic? What have we learned about who falls through the cracks in the community?
- 7.) What new ideas and possibilities emerged as a result because of COVID-19 shelter in place.