



**RETURNING TO CHURCH** – Ministry during the COVID-19 outbreak  
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## Resetting our Expectations

Though in the beginning many of us had mental images of all returning at once to our churches in celebration, we are now recognizing that returning to church will have to happen in phases. Gov. Tony Evers and the WI Department of Health Services have released the [Badger Bounce Back](#), a plan to reopen Wisconsin.

What future we will find ourselves in depends not only on the behavior of the virus, but on the actions of people – as individuals, churches, communities, and governments. The way forward will not be a matter of following a timetable, but of faithfully discerning the signs of the times, and responding accordingly. It has always been that way for the church: “You have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown....”

Please understand: for at least the next year, we anticipate our lives to be shaped by the timeline set by COVID-19. We face difficult choices between conflicting needs and imperatives. But we must avoid framing our situation in terms of a false choice between reviving the 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’ve already taken. And if we push the envelope too far by reopening our buildings and resuming gatherings prematurely, we may unfairly force on our more vulnerable members the choice between keeping themselves and others safe and participating in congregational life like everyone else.

In developing this document, we have consulted with public health experts, church leaders, and guidance developed by churches and judicatories around the United States. We offer it as a framework to guide clergy and lay leaders in making healthy and pastoral decisions, not as a fixed set of guidelines that will account for every circumstance. We recognize that all ministry is contextual. You will have to be aware of the needs of your particular congregation, your polity and theology, and local conditions. You may need to consult local health officials or your judicatory leaders as you finalize decisions. Remember, too: we may move back and forth between phases if second or third waves of infections emerge. The advice of public health officials may change as more becomes known about COVID-19.

We pray for a spirit of discernment, for wisdom, and patience. We pray for researchers and medical professionals; for the planners; for the ill and recovering; for those grieving and struggling with the weightiness of these times. We pray for the watchers and wonderers, and all those who wait upon the Lord.

May the Holy One, our Advent Hope, Good Teacher and Resurrection Truth, guide your decisions.

Below are our recommendations of how to phase a church re-opening which aligns with the phases of the *Badger Bounce Back*.

## A Model for Returning to Church

### SAFER AT HOME

See our document [Preparing for Safer at Home](#) for detailed recommendations on how churches should respond. We recommend the following baseline practices:

- Churches holding online worship services only. We recommend recording from home.
- Bible studies, small groups, etc. should be meeting online.
- Service ministries are using safety protocols and only addressing essential needs.
- Minimal, drop-in staffing sufficient for essential operations (deposits, mail processing, etc).

### PHASE ONE

In the Badger Bounce Back plan, Phase One begins when all gating Criteria and Core Responsibilities are met. In brief, look for two weeks of declining case counts, widespread availability of testing, contact tracing and no PPE shortages. See the *Badger Bounce Back* for more details.

What we recommend:

- Churches should continue holding online worship services only.
- Consider resuming recording in the sanctuary, while maintaining at least 6 ft of space between people – greater distance between those who are singing.
- Life rituals (weddings, funerals) should be kept to less than 10 in attendance. If you need to help set a limit, consider using immediate family. We advise only publicizing the date and location to those who are on the approved list to prevent hurt feelings or awkward situations. See our [Guide to Funerals During COVID-19](#) for additional resources.
- Bible studies and small groups continue to meet online.
- Keep office functions as limited as possible to ensure essential operations. Those in the office should be wearing masks; if you have more than one person in the office, make sure that surfaces, including the phone, are regularly sanitized.
- Consider allowing building users/renters back in (music lessons, etc.) if they are able to observe gathering limits and distancing protocols, and you are able to accommodate the cleaning needs.
- Church councils and leadership teams of less than 10 might consider meeting in person while wearing masks and maintaining social distancing, or continue meeting online.
- High risk individuals (people over 60 and those with underlying conditions), whether staff or volunteers, should continue to shelter in place.

### PHASE TWO

In the Badger Bounce Back plan, the shift from Phase One to Phase Two is based on a re-evaluation of the situation using the original criteria. You might expect several weeks of improving conditions to pass before this shift. This will require careful observance of physical/social distancing recommendations on an ongoing basis. See the *Badger Bounce Back* for more details.

- Worship, depending on size:
  - Churches over 50 average worship attendance (AWA): We recommend that you continue holding online worship, recording from home or the sanctuary with participation from small groups of people. If you choose to have multiple services, have a plan for managing the number of people per service. Have a plan to clean surfaces between services. Consider exploring what small group worship could look like as an alternative.
  - Smaller churches (under 50 AWA) might consider holding in person worship but make sure their

space is large enough to allow for social distancing. Have a contingency plan for overflows beyond the approved number of people.

#### General recommendations for worship:

- Whichever alternative you choose, we recommend continuing to share worship online as there will be many who are at high risk and cannot join you, or may not feel safe to return even if precautions are in place.
  - Wear cloth face masks while at church, as is recommended in public spaces.
  - Offering Communion/Eucharist safely will continue to be a challenge, as touching a face mask (to remove or shift it) contaminates it. Proximity to the communicant is a risk to the communion minister and those receiving. Give serious consideration to options within your tradition that minimize contact. This may mean you need to further postpone offering Communion to the faithful. Consult with your ecclesiastical authorities regarding your options.
  - Singing is among the riskier behaviors when it comes to spreading droplets/aerosols which can carry the virus a significant distance and remain suspended in the air. A cloth mask is unlikely to be enough to protect you or your neighbor. We recommend against singing in the sanctuary when the congregation is gathered.
  - Use no-touch alternatives for passing the peace, collecting offering, and liturgical resources. Consider removing prayerbooks and Bibles if you will have multiple services. Use bulletins (do not reuse) or screens as alternatives.
  - Distancing: Have people spread out in sanctuary space with one family unit per pew; keep empty pews between families. Explore meeting in a fellowship hall or outdoors if your space is small.
  - We recommend against offering a fellowship/coffee hour. Continue encouraging people to leave the building rather than mingling.
  - Life rituals (weddings, funerals, confirmations) could take place in a more traditional way, with careful attention to guest lists so as to keep under the 50 person limit, and physical distancing plans.
- Small Groups and Faith Formation:
  - Offer opportunities for Bible studies and small groups to meet in person or online. We recommend maintaining some online options for people who do not feel comfortable.
  - Don't yet have small groups? This is an opportunity to renew relationships and perhaps start some small groups within your congregation. As conditions shift, these small groups can provide spiritual and emotional support to one another, and offer a setting for mission.
  - We recommend against offering Vacation Bible School in person. While the risk to children is somewhat lower, there is an ongoing risk of them carrying the virus back home and sharing it with other family members. Whether or not they are symptomatic, someone who is infected can spread the virus. Consider whether you might offer an online or no-touch drop-off activity.
  - Similarly, we anticipate mission trips to be unwise for some time. This is an ideal time for mission in the local area. Are there food pantries or other community services in need of volunteers? Practice the art of mission in place. Keep your groups small so as not to overwhelm the ministries you serve. You are there to assist, not to occupy or divert their resources.
- Church Business
  - Regular office functions could resume more or less safely while maintaining social distancing and wearing masks. Continue to attend to cleaning and sanitizing the office. Pay particular attention to high-touch surfaces and cleaning hands after dealing with the offering.
  - Church councils and leadership teams of less than 10 might consider meeting in person while wearing masks and maintaining social distancing, or continue meeting online.
  - Smaller churches (under 50 members) could consider holding in-person membership meetings if official business is required.
  - Allow building users/renters to resume operations, with a plan to address cleaning needs and agreement to observe gathering and distancing protocols.
- General Building
  - Post signs indicating symptoms and urging people to stay home/seek medical attention if they have symptoms.
  - Maintain a good stock of tissue, soap, hand sanitizer and disposable paper towels for drying hands.
  - Clean the building regularly and between user groups, paying extra attention to high-touch surfaces.
  - If you become aware of someone in the church or a building user infected with COVID-19, put your communication plan into action, and cooperate fully with contact tracers.
- High risk individuals (people over 60 and those with underlying conditions), whether staff, volunteers,

or program participants, should continue to shelter in place.

**PHASE THREE**

In the Badger Bounce Back plan, the shift from Phase Two to Phase Three is based on a re-evaluation of the situation using the original criteria. You might expect several more weeks of improving conditions to pass before this shift. See the *Badger Bounce Back* for more details.

It is possible that conditions will not improve, but infections will increase again. In that case, physical distancing recommendations would need to be tightened temporarily in order to get back on track. Progress will not necessarily be linear. You can help by encouraging careful hygiene, following of the physical/social distancing recommendations, encouraging people to stay at home if they have any symptoms of illness, and to cooperate with contact tracers if they are diagnosed.

- High risk individuals (people over 60 and those with underlying conditions), whether staff, volunteers, or program participants, should continue to shelter in place during Phase Three. Hospitals and care facilities are recommended to continue limiting visitors. This has implications for church program, pastoral care and business.
- Wear cloth face masks while at church and in community ministry, as is recommended in public spaces.
- Worship:
  - We recommend that churches of all sizes offer in-person and remote/online options. See Phase Two for rationale.
  - Physical distancing is not required by Phase Three of the Badger Bounce Back. We recommend that you avoid crowding in the sanctuary to the extent possible. Consider continuing to offer multiple services, as people may want to spread out.
  - Watch for public health recommendations on Communion/Eucharist as we get to this phase and consult your ecclesiastical authorities.
  - Watch for public health recommendations on group singing as we arrive at this phase. The Council will monitor recommendations from the CDC and Wisconsin’s public health officials and offer updates.
  - Continue to use no-touch alternatives for passing the peace, collecting offering, and liturgical resources. Consider removing prayerbooks and Bibles if you will have multiple services. Use bulletins (do not reuse) or screens as alternatives.
  - We recommend against offering a fellowship/coffee hour. Continue encouraging people to leave the building rather than mingling.
- It should be safer for Bible studies and small groups to meet in person. We recommend maintaining some online options for high risk individuals and those who do not feel comfortable being in public.
- Office functions could resume as normal, with attention to cleaning.
- Groups, teams, and committees could meet in person.

**Questions for Church Leadership to Consider**

We offer this list of questions for the church Council/Vestry/Session/Consistory and Committees to consider in consultation with their clergy. We recommend that you work through these questions before re-launch:

- Has your insurance company weighed in on benchmarks for reopening, and for operating any programs? Your judicatory leader (Bishop, Presbyter, Conference Minister or other authority)? How will these influence your decision?
- Will you maintain an online streaming option once you are back together worshipping in physical space? How will that need to adjust when there is also in-person worship happening?
- How many people can your worship space hold if you are worshipping in family groups sitting 6 feet apart?
- How will you discourage the receiving line after church and/or congregating after worship services?
- When in earlier phases of relaunch, how will you cap attendance at events so there is room for members of the community to join you and so you don’t go over guidelines?
- How can you encourage small group gatherings with the building of small group, discipleship systems, etc in the earlier phases of relaunching – possibly even before we move from Safer at Home into Phase One? How might you continue these when in-person worship resumes?



- How will you ensure sanitation and disinfection in regards to communal spaces?
  - Worship bulletin disposal, prayerbooks, etc
  - Areas where small groups gather during the week
  - Nurseries and/or playgrounds
  - Pews or chairs following worship
  - Doorknobs, bathrooms, other areas that people touch when in your building
- How will you update your building use agreements to reflect the new realities of COVID-19?
- If someone contracts COVID-19, how will you communicate with your congregation and members who may have come into contact with that individual while maintaining privacy and pastoral care?
- If someone who has been in your building contracts COVID-19, how will you do a more intensive cleaning prior to its next use?
- How will you communicate your safety plan and best practices to the congregation?

## Recommended Reading/Viewing

These are resources which have influenced the thinking of WCC staff and/or have been recommended by experts with whom we have been consulting. They are ordered roughly in order of urgency, from immediate understanding of this pandemic time to a deeper understanding of how we might reconstruct how we do church on the other side of the pandemic. Find more as we gather them at [wichurches.org](http://wichurches.org), through the Resources menu, on the Coronavirus Resources page.

[Badger Bounce Back](#), WI Department of Health Services.

[Why Getting the US Back to Normal in the Next Couple Months is a Fantasy](#). *PBS NewsHour*, April 20, 2020.

[The Coronavirus in America: The Year Ahead](#). *New York Times*, April 18, 2020.

[COVID-19: Now I understand King’s truth of the ‘inescapable web of mutuality’](#), Zachary Helton, *Baptist News Global*, April 21, 2020.

[Church in these “VUCA” Times](#). Jake Morrill.

[24 Questions Your Church Should Ask Before People Return](#). Ken Braddy, Jr.

[The Four Spaces of Belonging](#).

[Leaders, It’s Time to Ask Critical Questions About the Post-COVID19 Church](#). John Thornburg, *United Methodist Insight*, April 14, 2020.

[Distributed Church](#). Fresh Expressions.

[How to Seize this Moment for Your Church](#). Ed Stetzer.

[The Employer’s Guide to COVID-19](#). Neckerman Insurance Services.

[Reopening a Business After the Coronavirus Shutdown](#). Neckerman Insurance Services.

[Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility](#).

[Ten Steps All Workplaces Can Take to Reduce Risk of Exposure to Coronavirus](#). OSHA

*This document was developed by Wisconsin Council of Churches staff, with input from religious leaders, local church pastors, insurance agents, public health and emergency management officials. We are particularly grateful for the insights and contributions of Dr. Geof Swain, MD, MPH, founding director of the WI Center for Health Equity.*

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