



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

A PLAN FOR PHASED RE-OPENING

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. Effective May 1, 2020, Iowans were allowed to once again gather for spiritual or religious purposes, so long as churches, synagogues, or other hosts of a spiritual or religious gathering take reasonable measures to ensure social distancing of employees, volunteers, and other participants, increased hygiene practices, and other public health measures to reduce the risk of further spread of COVID-19. This document attempts to provide such measures and procedures for First Presbyterian Church (FPC) as we discern how to adapt our life and mission to “gather as children of God, grow in faith, hope, and love, and go out to make Christ known” in these extraordinary times.

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 callings. We all want to return to church and our pre-COVID ways of life. We want to revive our economy, get back to regular routines. But 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.

The church is a high-risk setting for COVID-19 transmission. Church activities contain multiple factors that increase opportunities for droplet and contact COVID-19 spread. Like most churches, a high percentage of those who participate in ministry at FPC are at greater risk for serious complications from COVID-19. So while we seek to continue caring for the spiritual, emotional, and social needs of ourselves and others during this time, we must also live out our calling to “love our neighbors as ourselves” (Matt. 22: 37-39) by protecting each other from further harm. If we push the envelope too far by reopening our building and resuming gatherings prematurely, we may unfairly force one another to choose between keeping ourselves and others safe and participating in congregational life like everyone else.

We will need to be adaptive with this plan. It is likely that we will move back and forth between phases as new waves of infections emerge, including returning to previous phases if necessary. Best knowledge about COVID-19 may change as more is learned about the virus. We pray for a spirit of discernment, for wisdom, and patience.

Below is a phased process to guide our decision-making about when and how to adapt FPC's ministry and daily activities thru COVID-19. And while there is clear guidance for each phase, **the Session of First Presbyterian Church will determine when each phase of the plan is to be implemented** based on the best evidence and information from the Iowa Department of Public Health, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and in consultation with health professionals in our congregation. The Session may also choose to amend any portion of this document going forward. No matter what phase of the plan FPC is operating under, all are reminded to practice proper hygiene and other public health mitigation efforts including staying home if they are ill, think they are ill, or have had direct contact with someone who is ill.

PHASE ONE (CURRENT STATUS)

FPC postponed worship and all other activities in the building, other than office staff, on Monday, March 16, 2020. The following practices and procedures are currently in place:

- The church building is closed to the public.
- Worship is offered online only.
- All ministry teams and other groups meet online only.
- All persons entering the building must wear a mask, sanitize hands, and sign in.
- All persons must observe proper distancing of no less than 6' between persons.
- Weddings, baptisms, and funerals may occur in the sanctuary but must be kept to less than 10 in attendance (exceptions may be made to include immediate family if this number exceeds 10).
- Baptism services may include representatives from the congregation and may be recorded so that they can be included in a subsequent weekend recorded service.
- **Attendance:**
 - Our expectation is that persons attending must not be experiencing any symptoms of COVID-19 as outlined by the CDC (see list at the end of this document), or if they have come in contact with someone having, or exposed to, the virus in the past 14 days.
 - All in attendance must wear a mask.
 - All must observe proper hand hygiene upon entering the building (with a 70%+ alcohol hand sanitizer).
 - All must use proper distancing practices (i.e., maintain a 6' distance between persons of different households).
- No food or beverages will be served.
- All other practices and procedures will remain in place.

PHASE TWO

If after the implementation of Phase One, there continues to be a downward trajectory of individual active case counts of COVID-19 and flu-like illnesses in the state of Iowa, the RMCC Region 2 District, and/or Cerro Gordo County for an additional 14 days since the implementation of Phase One, FPC may begin holding public limited, restricted in-person worship on Sundays in accordance with the following guidelines:

- **Attendance:**

- No more than 45 people will be permitted in the building during worship.
- High risk individuals (as outlined at the end of this document) are strongly encouraged to continue worshipping at home.
- Children under 5 are also encouraged to continue worshipping at home, as they may not be able to maintain hygiene and distancing requirements.
- Worshipers who have been in contact with someone having, or exposed to, the virus should worship at home for 14 days after contact or notification of exposure.
- Worshipers are encouraged to check their temperature before attending, and if there are signs of fever (i.e., a temperature above 99.9° F) continue to worship at home.
- Our expectation is that worshipers will not be experiencing any symptoms of COVID-19, as outlined by the CDC (see list at end of this document).
- Worshipers who have traveled to what is considered a hot spot, or high risk COVID area are encouraged to worship at home for 14 days after arriving home.
- People of all ages may find the restricted environment required in these times to be stressful and unhelpful and should consider this before attending in-person worship.

- **Interactions:**

- All in attendance must wear a mask which covers both the mouth and nose (and which will be provided if needed).
- All in attendance must observe proper hand hygiene upon entering and exiting the building (with a 70%+ alcohol hand sanitizer).
- All in attendance must maintain a 6' distance between persons of different households.
- Worshipers will be seated and dismissed by ushers to help maintain appropriate distancing.
- There will be no physical contact during the sharing of the peace.
- Worshipers will be asked not to congregate before or after worship.

- **Procedures:**
 - Offering plates will not be passed. An offering collection box will be placed in the narthex, or worshipers may mail in their contributions or make use of on-line giving when it is available.
 - There will be no congregational singing, but instrumental and vocal solos from the choir loft will be allowed.
 - Hymnals, Bibles, and all printed material will be removed from pew racks.
 - If bulletins are used, they will be placed in pews, not handed out individually.
 - Children's activity bags will be removed.
- We will continue to offer a pre-recorded video worship service weekly.
- The church building will remain closed to meetings during the week.

PHASE THREE

If after implementation of Phase Two, there continues to be a downward trajectory of individual active case counts of COVID-19 and flu-like illnesses in the state of Iowa, the RMCC Region 2 District, and/or Cerro Gordo County for an additional 14 days, FPC may expand building use with the following guidelines:

- Small groups, committees and programs of less than 10 total people may consider meeting in person under the following guidelines:
 - Persons attending should not be experiencing any symptoms of COVID-19 as outlined by the CDC (see list at the end of this document).
 - Cleaning procedures for meeting groups are in place and able to be carried out in accordance with CDC guidelines.
 - All must use proper social distancing practices (i.e. maintain a 6' distance between persons of different households).
 - Those attending meetings should stay confined to identified meeting spaces.
 - All in attendance must wear a mask, provided if needed.
 - All must observe proper hand hygiene upon entering the building (70%+ alcohol hand sanitizer).
 - No food or drink can be shared among those meeting.
 - Groups with high risk individuals (persons over the age of 65 or with underlying health conditions) are encouraged to continue meeting online so all can participate equally.
- All other guidelines of Phase Two will remain in place.

PHASE FOUR

If after implementation of Phase Three, there continues to be a downward trajectory of individual active case counts of COVID-19 and flu-like illnesses in the state of Iowa, the RMCC Region 2 District in Iowa, and/or Cerro Gordo County for an additional 14 days, FPC may:

- Return to full in-person worship capacity and in-person programming.
- Maintain a weekly pre-recorded video worship presence.
- Continue to encourage persons who have underlying health conditions to consider risks of attending in-person worship.
- Require appropriate public health disease prevention and mitigation measures as prescribed by public health authorities.
- Permit ministry teams, groups, and non-member organizations to meet in person.
- Consider maintaining some electronic meetings and programming for high risk individuals and those who do not feel comfortable being in public.

HELPFUL INFORMATION

Pre-existing conditions for high-risk individuals (as outlined by the CDC) include:

- People with chronic lung disease or moderate to severe asthma
- People who have serious heart conditions
- People who are immunocompromised
 - Many conditions can cause a person to be immunocompromised, including cancer treatment, smoking, bone marrow or organ transplantation, immune deficiencies, poorly controlled HIV or AIDS, and prolonged use of corticosteroids and other immune weakening medications
- People with severe obesity (body mass index [BMI] of 40 or higher)
- People with diabetes
- People with chronic kidney disease undergoing dialysis
- People with liver disease

According to the CDC, people may experience the following symptoms after exposure to coronavirus:

- Fever or chills
- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Fatigue
- Muscle or body aches
- Headache
- New loss of taste or smell
- Sore throat
- Congestion or runny nose
- Nausea or vomiting
- Diarrhea

WHEN A PERSON WHO IS A CONFIRMED COVID-19 CASE HAS BEEN IN THE FACILITY

FPC will be prepared to close temporarily if a person who is a confirmed COVID-19 case has been in the facility. If this happens, the CDC recommends the following procedures:

Coordinate with local health officials.

Once learning of a person with confirmed COVID-19 who has been in the facility, immediately notify local health officials. These officials will have guidance for administrators and leaders to determine a course of action, which may include tracing contacts of that person. Local health officials can offer guidance for closing the facility or restricting access (who can enter or what areas of the facility can be accessed). An initial short-term closure may be recommended to allow time for the local health officials to gain a better understanding of the COVID-19 situation.

Clean and disinfect thoroughly.

Recommendations are to:

- Close off areas used by the ill persons and wait as long as practical before beginning cleaning and disinfection to minimize potential for exposure to respiratory droplets.
- Open outside doors and windows to increase air circulation in the area. If possible, wait up to 24 hours before beginning cleaning and disinfection.
- Clean and disinfect all areas (e.g., offices, bathrooms, and common areas) used by the ill persons, focusing especially on frequently touched surfaces.

*Thanks to the Wisconsin Council of Churches
for providing the document on which this plan was based.*

Approved by the Session of First Presbyterian Church, Mason City, Iowa
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