

**STATEMENT FROM THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN CONFERENCE BOARD OF DIRECTORS
REGARDING REOPENING OUR CHURCHES
May 14, 2020**

***A safe, healthy, and faithfully committed church community is everyone's goal.
May we all be thoughtful and strategic in our planning and implementing
any timeline and plan for reopening our church buildings.
We carry our sanctuary with us. We never leave it.***

The RMC Board of Directors issued statements in March and April encouraging all RMC congregations and associations to initiate electronic worship services, postpone in-building church activities at least through the month of May, and follow the recommendations of local and state health organizations regarding COVID-19 mitigation.

Our three states and multitude of counties and municipalities in the Rocky Mountain Conference region are starting to amend orders to reduce the severity of mandated Stay at Home and Safer at Home practices. Several congregations are beginning to talk about returning to in person worship services and other in-building activities.

As part of its continuing role of pro-actively researching, role modeling and sharing best practices on responding to the ever-changing impacts of COVID-19, the RMC Board of Directors commissioned a team to research and report questions associated with developing a return to on-site worship and activities. On May 14, 2020 the RMC Board of Directors met to review the work of that team.

To promote the safety and security of our congregations and communities, the Board recommends that all congregations commission a strategic planning team within their own church to assess the wide range of issues associated with the decision to hold in-building worship and other activities.

To assist in that process, this reference document is being sent to all congregations in the RMC identifying many of these issues.

The Board encourages our membership to resist the urge to “get back to our normal way of doing things as quickly as we can.” Take inspiration from this passage in Isaiah 43:18-19.

“So says the Lord:
Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a new way in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert.” *(The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language)*

We are Christ's church, his hands and feet, voice and heart in the world. We are doing a new thing! We are living into our mission as Christian churches of the UCC; each and every week in myriad ways online and through other virtual means, we are proclaiming God's unconditional love for the people of the world who are suffering physically, emotionally, and spiritually. While we have been used to attending church in a physical location and we yearn for our old ways and familiar surroundings, we have found sacred spaces and reconnected with our beloved church families in this "new thing" that brings us together in other ways, even as we are physically separated. A local church strategic planning team will help us embrace the new thing God is creating while also respecting and honoring, where safe and appropriate, our traditions, new realities and longings.

WHY SHOULD YOU DEVELOP A STRATEGIC PLANNING TEAM IN YOUR CHURCH?

1. Ensures that the return to worship (RTW) plan is aligned with the mission and theology of your church;
2. Helps ensure church leadership communicates and role models the details of the RTW plan;
3. Reduces risk of RTW plans being developed in isolation of other plans or is dependent on the energy of one or a few people;
4. Increases the potential for full consideration of the safety and Health of staff and congregants along with consideration of the risks and liabilities inherent in sponsoring group activities during a pandemic; and
5. Provides resources for required changes in worship.
6. **Is God calling us to "a new thing" – a new way of being church?**

THREE OVERARCHING STRATEGIC QUESTIONS TO ASK AND ANSWER

1. What is the primary reason driving a desire to return to on-site worship?

For example, if the primary reason driving return to on-site worship is maintaining relationships and honoring sabbath space, but your return to worship plans restrict almost all relational and holy activity to ensure the safety and health of all, should you pursue other ways to meet the relationship need?

Perhaps your answer to what is driving your desire to return to on-site worship is a feeling of loss or anger over losing a cherished part of your routine. Again, if your return to worship plans restrict almost all of your cherished parts of gathering and holy activity to ensure the safety and health of all, should you pursue other ways to meet the relationship need?

2. In what ways are you going to continue to minister to your online congregants once you go back into your church building?

Consider the creative opportunities as well as the inclusive opportunities that can be afforded to people through virtual worship and alternative forms of relationship building such as chat rooms, open office hours, “happy hour” social times, prayer groups, study groups, faith formation for children, and interaction for persons living alone in isolation.

3. How will you research, confirm, or suggest to the church governing body the decision-making process and the decision-makers, including who has the final say, for ongoing decisions regarding the use of the church building and the protection of employees: pastor, church board, overseeing manager, etc.? Consult your church governance documents, covenants for conduct, and established models and practices for congregational decision-making.

ISSUES FOR YOUR STRATEGIC PLANNING TEAM TO CONSIDER

Personnel

The relationship between the congregation, clergy and staff is summarized in documents such as clergy call agreements, job descriptions, and personnel policies. The COVID-19 pandemic may present unique personnel issues that may not be covered by those documents. Here are some questions to consider. Please be aware that requiring employees to sign liability waivers is both illegal and unenforceable.

1. What will be the church’s response to staff members who do not feel safe participating in on-site worship and/or on-site church activities? Remember that the church as an employer has a responsibility to make reasonable efforts to protect its employees, including clergy.
2. Have clergy and lay leadership developed together reasonable expectations for clergy hours and responsibilities given the new realities? (See Addendum: Preventing Clergy Burnout.)
3. What will be the church’s response to volunteers who want to be on-site but are in high risk categories?
4. When events, activities and programming beyond worship are resumed, will the church have formal COVID-19 mitigation training for all staff and volunteers?
5. Will your church require clergy and staff to have personal protective equipment (masks and gloves) when on church premises or engaged in church activities, including pastoral care?
6. Does your church have Workers Compensation coverage that will protect clergy and support staff in the event they are afflicted with COVID-19?
7. Are you aware of relevant provisions in labor and employment law that apply to churches as well as orders and guidelines set by your local and/or state authorities?

Management

In order to comply with social distancing and group size limitations that are a part of orders or recommendations from health organizations and government orders, many of our churches will need to make changes to their building and property. These orders and recommendations may also require adjustments to how people enter, exit, and move around the property. Development, communication and compliance with necessary changes for worship, other

church sponsored programs and the activities of other groups using the building are reviewed in this section on management and the section on other groups that follows it. **(See Addendum: Building Safety and Addendum: Worship Practices)**

1. How will you communicate your strategic plan to your congregation and educate them in its implementation? Who do people contact if they have questions or concerns?
2. Do you have a phase-in plan for various programs in your church that will protect vulnerable persons such as aged parishioners, children and youth, volunteers, and staff?
3. Have you evaluated whether some programs or committees could be conducted remotely on an ongoing basis?
4. Is there a plan for notification and response if someone in your church or a visitor becomes ill – while on site, later after having been at your church? How will this be communicated to individuals in your church?
5. Have you evaluated signage in your building: access, guidelines about distancing, activities and sanitation?
6. Have you determined which types of church social events or worship day hospitality will be permitted in the building or on the grounds and the guidelines pertaining to those events, such as distancing, types of activities, food, singing and dancing, etc.?
7. Have you identified changes that may need to be made in your building to improve safety?
 - effective ventilation
 - foot traffic patterns
 - access to restrooms including distancing
 - moving furniture and chairs
 - replacing carpet with cleanable surfaces
 - replacing pews with chairs that are easily distanced and cleaned
 - marking floors and seating for standing and sitting
 - protecting the pastor and musicians from contact
8. Have you identified and defined the parameters of mission projects sponsored by your church or conducted on church grounds such as food pantry, homeless sheltering, care and service to aged persons, errand-running, etc.?

Other Groups Meeting at Your Church

1. Have you assessed the implications of letting other groups and organizations meet at your church when you lack control over whether they are following your policies and procedures for virus prevention?
2. Have you checked with your insurance carrier to make sure clergy and church leaders are indemnified from responsibility if you allow access to your building?
3. If you allow access to your building, are you requiring proof of adequate insurance and written acceptance of any liability?
4. If you allow groups to come into your church, are you adequately prepared for health and cleanliness after each gathering?
5. Have you made your church community aware that there will be other groups in the building?

6. Do you have an accurate listing of who has access by key or keycode to your building?
Failure to know who has access to the building or who is coming or going leaves the church and staff vulnerable to groups or individuals who may be ill or may not follow health, safety or security standards adopted by your church.

Financial and Insurance

The business of the church also needs to be considered before re-opening your building. How to handle donations (including receiving the offering during worship), paper money and checks so as to keep your volunteer counters safe is just one consideration. Hand in hand with financial issues go insurance and liability considerations. Following are some questions for you to consider. **(See Addendum: Liability and Insurance)**

1. Have you evaluated your capacity to accept contributions in a variety of efficient ways not requiring the physical handling of checks and money? (See resource list, #6, Rocky Mountain Conference.)
2. Have you evaluated and planned for increased costs in professional disinfection services and sanitation supplies, signage, and possible building retrofitting?
3. What are the terms and coverage limits of your church liability insurance policy?
4. If your church operates a daycare or school in your building or on your property, what are the terms and limits of your coverage?

Worship Practices

Opening your church buildings carries its own set of challenges. Social distancing may or may not be enough right now to protect people. Requiring congregants and volunteers to sign liability waivers is unenforceable and unjust. **(See Addendum: Worship Practices)**

1. Are you replacing hands-on and contact worship activities with safer practices? (See specific examples in the Worship Practices Addendum.)
2. Are you replacing hands on worship aids, such as hymnals, Bibles, and paper bulletins with safer practices? (See specific examples in the Worship Practices Addendum.)
3. Are you having trained persons responsible for monitoring activity on church days to ensure compliance with all protection policies?
4. Are you limiting the number of people in the church building at any one time in accordance with the latest CDC, local and state recommendations or orders?
5. What procedures have you developed should an outbreak occur in your building or an uptick in the cases in your geographic area warrant the closing again of your church?
6. Do you know what to do and who to contact if your pastor is ill with the virus, is hesitant or refusing to enter the church building, or has issued an order for employees of the church to stay home?

ADDENDUMS

These addendums are intended to provide an additional level of detail on topics referenced above. As your strategic planning team begins its work you may want to refer to these by topic area.

Addendum: Resources

1. Rocky Mountain Conference UCC staff, board, and volunteers stand ready to help you.
<https://rmcucc.org/covid-19-resources>
<https://rmcucc.org/board-staff/>
email: connect@rmcucc.org
2. The Disaster Resource and Response team of the UCC has put together an extensive list of resources for guidance in operating in times of crisis and in reopening of churches.
https://www.ucc.org/disaster_coronavirus_resources_from_the_ucc
Resources from UCC Council for Health & Human Service Ministries
<https://www.chhsm.org/coronavirus>
3. Info from the CDC
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>
4. Wisconsin Council of Churches-----RETURNING TO CHURCH – Ministry during the COVID-19 outbreak. Released April 23, 2020 and currently updated regularly.
<https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/>
5. Check the website of your church’s insurance provider for many COVID-19 resources. Here is a link to the Insurance Board, the RMC’s insurer:
<https://www.insuranceboard.org/covid-19-Resources>
Also see attached handouts from the Insurance Board:
Your Ministry During COVID-19: Re-Opening Your Church Office
Understanding Your Insurance Board Coverage: Coronavirus-COVID-19
6. Southern New England Conference UCC – excellent collection of resources
<https://www.sneucc.org/coronavirus>

Addendum: Preventing Clergy Burnout

While many of us are feeling stress and anxiety in times like these, and many have stressful jobs or no jobs, clergy have these stresses and more. They are called on to mediate God in a world gone crazy. They are asked to make meaning and provide answers that may not be knowable in a time of crisis. Below are some things to consider in minimizing both clergy stress and leadership anxiety.

1. Have clergy and lay leadership developed together reasonable expectations for clergy hours and responsibilities given the new realities?
 - Are you continuing to meet to identify new issues and expectations that need to be addressed?
 - Are clergy being asked to do things they are not trained to do or originally hired to do? Are they being asked to wear too many hats?
 - Are clergy being given adequate support to accomplish the agreed upon expectations? For example, technical resources and training, adequate volunteer/staff help, etc.
 - If needed, have the duties and responsibilities of Church leadership been adjusted to accommodate?
 - Are there duties the deacons, or committees can share?
 - Does your judicatory body need to meet more often to handle needed strategic discussions and business of the church?
2. Being clergy can be a very lonely job. Do clergy have an adequate support network and reasonable time off?
 - Have they been encouraged to find or maintain a supportive network of colleagues who relate to their circumstances?
3. Are clergy being kept informed of any issues which may have implications for their financial health or the financial health of the church?
4. Are there programs that can be eliminated or put on hold until things return to a more stable state?
5. Are you able to find a balance between watching out for the needs of clergy without crossing professional or ethical boundaries?
6. Does your church have a pastor parish relations team or process in place to monitor all of the above and provide a safe place for both the pastor and the congregants to discuss issues related to this topic and others?
7. Has the church or pastor identified a clergy colleague not currently serving a parish to help with the increased load of pastoral care and worship leadership?

ADDENDUM: Building Safety

Things to consider:

1. Have you contracted with a professional disinfection service provider for regular deep cleaning and periodic disinfection of the work areas and public areas of the church building?
2. Will you require masks and gloves for employees?
3. Will you require daily temperature testing and equipment for employees of the church?
4. Have you installed hand sanitizers machines at all entrances: church buildings, offices, nursery, common areas, all public washrooms, classrooms, and sanctuary?
5. How will you monitor compliance with the above safety considerations?
6. Have you identified a COVID-19 Protection Coordinator responsible for overseeing all procedures and issues inherent with prevention of the novel coronavirus?
7. Have you identified a person responsible for keeping up with CDC, local and state news briefings and recommendations?
8. Will employees who feel ill be ordered to stay home and be compensated for missing work days?
9. Have you identified employees who can work from home and those who must be on-site at the church, and for those employees at church, have you identified staggered work hours and requirements for them?
10. How are you protecting the pastor against exposure from other employees, church visitors and work crews, pastoral care contacts, and exposure during worship activities?
11. How are you protecting other essential workers and volunteers against exposure from other employees, church visitors and work crews, pastoral care contacts, and exposure during worship activities?

Addendum: Worship Practices

This is a time when you need to consider changing worship practices to keep your congregation and worship leaders safe. Evaluate what you are substituting for passing the peace (with skin contact), serving communion with common elements, baptism with physical touch, communal hymn and liturgy singing, passing offering plates and lack of social distancing. Recognize that this is a collective list; no one of these items is sufficient unto itself.

Here are some areas to consider:

- non-contact forms of greeting
- alternate ways to practice the sacraments of communion and baptism that do not require touching the elements or people
- no-touch offering collection
- pew or pew chair distancing
- hand sanitizing stations
- disinfection of microphones, headsets, musical instruments, pews and all seating areas,
- disinfection of all public and private washrooms and baby changing stations, doors, trash receptacles, and other common areas after each worship service
- a requirement for masks to be worn at all times while in the building
- posting masking requirements at all entrances to the church and at all common areas
- knowing and keeping current on the cautions and recommendations regarding choirs, vocal groups and congregational singing in the church. This is emerging as one of the key issues in COVID-19 prevention in churches and advisements are being updated. **Singing has been named as one of the primary ways of spreading the virus.**
- removal of coffee stations and food stations
- cancellation of after-worship mingling and person-to-person contact
- protections for children and faith formation teachers
- temperature-taking of persons before they enter the building and denying access to any person who tests at equal to or greater than 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit or who is experiencing any symptoms of illness
- evaluating safety of parking lots, playgrounds, outdoor seating areas, and all common entrances and areas inside the church building
- establishing who has the authority to turn persons away or remove persons who are not in compliance with your procedures and requirements
- considering closing public restrooms and the implications of that decision on the health and wellbeing of visitors to the church and local health requirements to keep restrooms open and available
- having a plan for exit and entry into the building, e.g. one entrance and dismiss parishioners by rows

ADDENDUM: Liability and Insurance

It is a harsh reality that where there is an opportunity for blame-placing, lawyers will inevitably seize upon opportunities for litigation against persons and entities that carry responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of others. Litigation pertaining to the novel coronavirus will last 100 years into the future, and at this point in time there is no telling just how much liability churches will face from opening their doors to in-person worship.

A survey of the subject area reveals massive law firms and smaller offices already gearing up for novel coronavirus litigation. Lawyers and staff are being added and assigned to find and sign up clients for lawsuits against all kinds of entities. One of the largest firms dedicated solely to large scale torts practice is offering representation in everything from class actions against manufacturers of sanitation products to actions against universities for denying students essential services. Negligence lawsuits are the largest topic area: claims made that entities did not do enough or do well enough to protect customers and invited guests from catching COVID-19. Here is the lead-in to their website advertising:

“With the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak spreading across the globe, sickening thousands and causing untold health and economic damage, legal action is one way that impacted consumers, workers, homeowners, and others can seek relief. Some coronavirus lawsuits take aim at individuals and companies that allegedly sought to profit during a time of crisis; others argue that greater care could have helped stem the disease’s spread.

[Name of law firm] is on the front line of coronavirus litigation as we file and investigate lawsuits. For the latest legal news, follow [us] on Twitter and join us on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Have an idea for a coronavirus lawsuit? Get in touch with a lawyer.”

Reported today, the family of a meatpacking plant worker who died of COVID-19, filed suit against the Philadelphia-based company for wrongful death for having failed to protect its employees against the threat of the novel coronavirus.

Don’t make the mistake of thinking that because you have taken reasonable precautions to protect your employees, parishioners and guests from catching the virus while on church property or at church-encouraged or sponsored events. Ultimate liability notwithstanding, claims and civil lawsuits may be filed against the church, pastors and lay leaders, resulting in expense, agony, and potentially devastating emotional and economic damage. In past years, churches and their pastors in our denomination and in all the worshipping world have been sued by parishioners and their families for a whole host of negligence claims. And it only takes one person getting sick, no matter how large or small your congregation, to bring a claim for money damages to your doorstep.

We also don’t yet know what, if any, criminal liability may attach to church leaders who open churches should there be a valid local, state or federal order to close or stay closed.