



WISCONSIN COUNCIL  
OF CHURCHES  
COURAGE. JUSTICE. HOLY IMAGINATION.

## RETURNING TO CHURCH An Early Fall Update September 21, 2020

With eight Wisconsin cities occupying positions on a list of the twenty US cities with the fastest rising numbers of COVID cases as of mid-September, we continue to urge caution in gathering the church in physical locations.<sup>1</sup> **At this time, we do not advise gathering indoors. Outdoor events are much safer than indoors. Online options are preferred.**

That being said, we continue to be contacted by churches seeking recommendations for safer choices around gathering indoors. As we have our first cooler days and evenings this fall, this becomes a more common question. Please remember there is *no* way to gather in person which *eliminates all risk* of transmitting COVID. There are only safer choices we can make to reduce the risk to ourselves, those around us, and the community at large. Our choices are an expression of care for self and neighbor; they are profoundly faithful decisions.

**IF your church is committed to resuming worship indoors**, here's a summary of some of the best information we have curated from our conversations with health officials, scientists, and other research. This is not medical advice or a guarantee. Always check with your insurance provider and wider church officials about their recommendations and requirements before proceeding.

### SAFER CHOICES FOR INDOOR WORSHIP and CHURCH ACTIVITY:

- Limit attendance and maintain a list of who is present in case it is needed for contact tracing. An online tool such as signup genius can help with tracking seating availability.
- Commit to physical distancing (6 ft+) and wearing face masks. Keep a low-touch environment. Organized seating and dismissal by ushers can help with distancing.
- Strongly encourage flu shots! Health officials are recommending flu vaccination by October.
- Projecting one's voice as a worship leader (preacher, liturgist, chanting) creates as much aerosol as singing. Maintain *additional* physical distance in the chancel, wear a mask, and avoid sharing microphones. Plexiglass shields are generally unhelpful.
- Abstain from congregational or choral singing. See the resources linked on our website. Some alternatives: recordings, reading hymn lyrics, meditative listening, hand signs, sign language, clapping, rhythm instruments, dancing.
- Maintain your online worship options. If your only online offering is streaming your "live" in-person worship option, pitch your delivery to the online audience more than the audience in the sanctuary.

- Avoid eating together indoors. This is a high-risk activity. Be diligent with physical distancing and hand hygiene if proceeding with Eucharist/Holy Communion. Follow the most strict health protocols of your ecclesiastical authorities.
- Ventilation:
  - Increase the amount of air that comes from outdoors: open windows if possible, but avoid the use of fans.
  - Prop doors open to reduce touchpoints and increase fresh air.
  - Consider investing in a higher quality filter for your HVAC system. It's a marginally higher expense but will increase protection.
  - Room air filters and other gadgets being marketed for COVID have pros and cons. See the HVAC webinar on our Youtube channel for more detail.
- Cleaning:
  - Be especially diligent about cleaning high-touch surfaces like light switches, doorknobs, faucets.
  - Invest in a good stock of cleaning supplies and paper products.
  - Make sure soap dispensers and hand sanitizer dispensers are always full, garbage cans are regularly emptied.
  - Ideally, leave worship space empty for 2+ days after events to reduce the risk of transmission via aerosols (fine droplets dispersed in air that linger for a long time) or fomites (viral particles that land on surfaces).
- What is your plan for:
  - Committing those in attendance to your re-gathering expectations? Do you have a covenant that people should sign? Who will enforce masking or distancing expectations? What will you do if someone does not follow the expectations?
  - If someone who has attended church is diagnosed COVID+?
  - If there is a COVID outbreak associated with the church?
  - Stepping back from indoor worship – is there a number of positive COVID cases in the community or church, or % positive cases, or some other measure that will be your guide to pausing indoor worship for a time?

**We urge you to plan ahead:** nearly every county in Wisconsin has a high level of COVID activity right now. With exponential spread, community health can change rapidly. Be prepared to modify your plans to keep parishioners, staff, and clergy safe and healthy as the situation evolves.

This document was developed by Wisconsin Council of Churches staff with input from religious leaders, local church pastors, scientists and public health experts. This is not a formal policy statement of the Council. We recommend that you consult your ecclesiastical authorities for final guidance. Released September 21, 2020.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.tmj4.com/news/coronavirus/8-wisconsin-cities-on-nyts-list-of-metro-areas-with-fastest-growing-covid-19-numbers>