

# Iowa Faith Leadership Network

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## Opening Hearts, Extending Closures:

### A Guide to (Not)(Yet) Re-Opening Houses of Worship

May 1, 2020

#### Introduction

We are living in an 'in-between' time: the changes to our ways of worship due to the state of emergency closings came suddenly; and many if not most of our congregations and ministries in Iowa found ways to adapt to a new reality. Now, just as suddenly, the restrictions on congregations have been lifted due to constitutional concerns. While the threat of infection has not ended, we find ourselves with the freedom--and perhaps burden--of making potentially life-altering decisions for the people we serve. How best shall we protect the health and safety of our people, in body, mind, and spirit? What impact will our choices as faith leaders have on the future of our congregations --especially as we transition into what may be an extended time of uncertainty?

#### Gratitudes

This Guide owes a wonderful debt of gratitude to the many resources, discussions, and expert medical opinions which have helped to form the information presented here. A detailed list of resources and readings is included at the end of this document, and will be updated as other quality resources emerge.

The Guide especially owes its thanks to Rev. Kerri Parker for permission to adapt the 'Returning to Church' guide produced by the Wisconsin Council of Churches in response to Wisconsin's plan for a phased re-opening of society.

An additional round of thanks goes to Dr. Megan Srinivas, Infectious Diseases Specialist, of Fort Dodge, who took the time to educate faith leaders on health considerations for re-opening houses of worship; and to Rev. Sarah Trone Garriott, Interfaith Engagement Coordinator of the Des Moines Area Religious Council, for arranging the online training via Zoom.

Both resources may be found in our 'Resources and Reading List,' available on our Facebook page and website/ blog.

## **Background**

On March 17, 2020, Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds declared a statewide public health emergency and the closure of many public places, including businesses, recreational facilities, schools, civic institutions, and houses of worship. Social gatherings of more than 10 people were not permitted, and social distancing measures were strongly recommended to slow down the rate at which COVID-19 infected the population so that healthcare providers had enough resources to treat patients. During that time, many faith leaders at the local level learned to hold worship online via web conferencing tools, and to minister to their people via phone, mail, email, and social media. On April 27, Gov. Reynolds announced the re-opening of several business sectors starting May 1. She also announced the removal of all restrictions on religious congregations, citing constitutional concerns, but encouraged continued social distancing measures. However, the 'Rule of 10' remains in effect in other public settings. In the days following, Iowa faith leaders at the local, regional, and state level have been trying to discern how best to continue ministering to their people and the wider community under the present and ongoing circumstances: testing remains limited in many areas, with some concerns about accuracy; no treatment other than supportive care is currently available; and a vaccine is still believed to be several months away.

## **Immediate Recommendations and Responses (through at least May 31, 2020)**

On April 28, 2020, the judicatory heads of ten Christian denominations in Iowa released a public statement urging congregations not to resume in-person worship or other activities at this time. Additional religious organizations have since issued their own statements discouraging in-person activities for at least the month of May, with many re-assessing on or before June 1.

Due to the ongoing risk of transmission, lack of treatment or vaccine available, and the high percentage of persons who meet high-risk health guidelines in many congregations, the Iowa Faith Leadership Network does not recommend in-person worship or other activities resume during the month of May 2020. We will re-assess this situation on or before June 1.

Continuing as we have been throughout the month of May allows us time to see how opening other sectors of society will affect our local communities. Since the virus has an incubation time of up to two weeks, and testing/ diagnostic times can take almost as

long, it may be about four weeks before we see the fuller scope of the virus in our local areas.

As of this writing, some parts of Iowa are seeing skyrocketing numbers of cases, while other areas are seeing little to no virus activity. With the openings, we expect to see more cases due to increased retail activity and inter-city travel. Cases have normally doubled about every 2-3 days without social distancing, since each infected person can infect several more people before they realize they are sick.

During this time, we have two goals on which to focus as faith leaders:

- ❖ Protect the health and safety of the people in our care; and
- ❖ Maintain a nurturing community of faith through virtual means of connection

We recommend the following as 'best practices' for congregational worship and care:

- ❖ Continue holding worship and other essential meetings of the congregation through alternative means, such as online web conferences; as well as provide a means for those without internet to call in by phone.
- ❖ Continue to staff buildings at a minimal level for essential functions.
- ❖ Continue mailing and/or emailing a worship bulletin, sermon notes, and/or other activities on a regular basis for home devotional use.
- ❖ Continue using a 'phone tree' method by which a group of congregational care volunteers can each check in on multiple households on a regular basis, with additional care given to those who live alone or face extra life burdens.
- ❖ Continue pastoral care visits to those who are ill, grieving, or hospitalized via phone or video messaging on an electronic device.

- ❖ Continue using a combination of text-based social media posts as well as ‘live’ fellowship times within the congregation, such as youth or adult small groups.
- ❖ Continue encouraging congregation members to call and/ or write one another with messages of care and encouragement on a regular basis.
- ❖ Encourage members to find additional creative ways to keep up a sense of connection and morale within your congregation during this extended time, such as car caravans and card showers to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, etc., taking all appropriate social distancing measures while doing so.
- ❖ Continue encouraging members who are able to do so safely to engage in mission service to the wider community, per the needs of helping organizations in your area (food pantries, mask-making efforts, etc.)
- ❖ Acknowledge and communicate that some people may need to continue ‘sheltering in place’ for health concerns while others must return to work for economic security, and encourage both groups to continue infection control practices, such as washing hands frequently, using masks when in public for essential errands, and social distancing measures.

The next section details best practices for occasional services during this time, such as weddings, funerals, baptisms, ordinations/ installations and other possibilities that may come up in your local setting. These are worship occasions which may be particularly time-sensitive for the families/ individuals involved, and which also would have normally been accompanied by larger social gatherings (receptions). This guidance seeks to find a pastorally appropriate response while also taking appropriate health precautions when these ceremonies need to happen during the next 3-6 months.

In making the following recommendations, the following considerations are made:

- ❖ Keeping 6ft social distance is only considered preventive in brief interactions (data sources vary, but 10-30 minutes maximum), especially in indoor settings.
- ❖ The use of cloth masks by all parties is helpful, but not a fully effective strategy.

## **Weddings, Funerals, and Other Life Passages**

*\*Please note: in each of these 'household' special services described, the risk level and/or underlying health conditions of the faith leaders involved should be taken into consideration, as well as the risk level of the immediate household members.*

On May 1, the Deputy Director of the Iowa Department of Public Health, Sarah Reisetter, reminded the public that while weddings and funerals were permitted religious services, wedding receptions and funeral receptions/ repasts were **not** permitted social gatherings at this time.

Wedding and funeral ceremonies, including graveside burials, should continue to include no more than ten persons, and the best practice for public health is to limit those in attendance to the immediate household members.

We encourage wedding and funeral officiants and/or the families involved to make arrangements for additional households to participate in the ceremony via a video conferencing service, such as Zoom; and to wait to schedule a more public reception until public health officials advise it is safe to do so. A vows renewal may be appropriate on a future anniversary.

Even among the limited number of participants at weddings and/or funerals, masks should be worn, singing omitted or done at a distance of 25 feet or more from other participants; and all other social distancing and infection control measures carefully followed.

An outdoor setting for these ceremonies may be helpful for reducing, but not fully eliminating, the risk of infection. Weather conditions such as humidity and air flow, as well as sustained proximity of participants to one another, can all increase or decrease risk of transmission.

## **Baptisms and Other Ceremonies for Infants**

Due to the higher risks of severe complications of COVID-19 for pregnant women, women who have recently given birth, and infants, a best practice would be to wait a few months before performing a baptism or other ceremonies until both mother and child are less medically vulnerable. However, if there is an urgent health concern or traditionally time-sensitive need for the ceremony to be performed (such as circumcision/ bris), the ceremony should be limited to the immediate household and

officiant, with all participants old enough to do so wearing masks and taking other social distancing and infection control measures listed above.

### **Baptisms, Laying On of Hands, and Related Ceremonies for Youth and Adults**

A baptism of an older youth or adult should also be limited to the immediate household members and the officiant. An appropriate setting for such a ceremony may be outdoors, with all appropriate social distancing, masks, and other infection control measures carefully followed. Due to the inability to socially distance and the difficulty of keeping a mask on during a full-immersion baptism, a best practice would be to postpone full-immersion baptisms.

A laying on of hands, such as the installation of faith leaders or as part of a coming of age ceremony, could be done 'virtually,' by raising hands in the direction of the person(s) installed/ ordained/ confirmed, and the ceremony could also include wider faith community participation through video conferencing. A physical laying on of hands would prevent adequate social distancing, and may best be postponed until a more medically advisable time.

### **Graduation/ Baccalaureate Ceremonies**

This year's high school and college seniors are in a particularly difficult position: in all likelihood, they will be moving on to the next stage of their life, and a new community, without the traditional social gatherings and ceremonies that accompany this time. It is important to offer the opportunity for farewells and blessings for their future journeys. One good possibility is to offer a 'virtual baccalaureate' via web conferencing for seniors in your congregation, as well as other seniors in the community. Another option is to request a card shower for graduates. Many congregations like to provide a small gift to seniors, and a poem or letter, on paper suitable for framing at home, that speaks to the unique nature of these times, the themes of loss as well as possibility, may be especially appropriate. These could be easily mailed to seniors' homes.

### **Drive-In Worship, Outdoor Worship, and Related Gatherings**

Drive-In and Outdoor large group gatherings may seem particularly appealing in the beautiful spring season. However, these gatherings are also not without risks and problems: there are issues of children as well as adults needing restroom facilities; the possibility of transmitting the infection to those 'downwind' if car windows are rolled down or standing/sitting outside; the need to wear masks and park or arrange participants at a distance (6ft for normal speaking/ listening for brief periods of time; 25ft or more for vigorous speech, laughter, or singing); and the need not to touch or pass

any items between persons of different households, such as offering plates, Communion elements, bulletins, hymnals, gifts/ giveaways, etc. Drive-in events may also exceed the 'Rule of 10' recommended for other settings, and increase the size of a potential outbreak.

A better practice may be to use the 'Cheer Train'/ caravan/ parade approach as an outreach or congregational care activity, where participants do not exit their vehicles and the cars keep moving--perhaps around town past various members' homes or group living facilities, or similar possibilities. This can give participants a feeling of connection while reducing risk to a much greater degree.

### **Accessibility, Inclusion, and Additional Considerations**

Various discussions have noted that the forced move to virtual/ online worship and gatherings has had a pleasant outcome of increasing participation among people of the congregation who have not been active previously for some time. Many of these 'new' participants may have been unable to participate previously due to caregiving roles, work schedules, health conditions, transportation issues, or other obstacles.

At the same time, other groups are finding themselves left out of the new way of being a virtual congregation: those who do not have sufficient technology or internet access, and those who may have other obstacles which might interfere with the move to online worship, such as conditions which prevent the use of technology available in the home.

As we continue further into this extended time of virtual congregations and ministry, we can and should continue to look for creative ways to include both groups. Mail and phone are useful for those unable to interact through technology, as might be pursuing broadcast through a local access TV or radio station. Another possibility may be purchasing a limited number of devices with a pre-paid data plan to loan out to members so they can access worship online. Some instruction (written or by phone) may be needed to help facilitate this process. Congregational leadership should also discuss any concerns about breakage or loss, and the cost and feasibility of these options in their local setting.

### **Concluding Thoughts for This Present Time: Wait, Watch, and Pray**

After our first several weeks of closure, quarantine and 'stay at home' measures, the adrenaline and rush has started to subside and we realize we have moved into a longer, uncertain, phase of 'new normal.' How long will this phase last? We don't know for sure, but we can spend this time wisely by waiting--to see how early re-opening efforts in other sectors of society go and whether we return to a higher level of closures. We

may wisely watch--to see when several weeks go by of declining numbers of cases in our locality and health experts reach some level of consensus that further re-opening is advisable; and praying--in whatever ways we are led, for effective testing, treatment, and vaccines; for the well-being of healthcare workers and other essential workers; for the well-being of all who are struggling at this time due to lost wages, school closures, or working at home while caring for others; for those who are sick or who are at highest risk of becoming sick; and for all who grieve. We also pray for the wisdom of our community leaders, whether local, state, national, or global.

In light of continuing developments (particularly around HVAC systems, and the practice of Communion), Iowa Faith Leadership Network is publishing this first phase of the Guide to cover May 2020, and will release additional guidance, as appropriate. Some congregations and clergy may wish to prepare right away for the next phase of re-opening. There are many good resources for discernment questions and cleaning checklists available in our Resource and Reading List. However, here are a few basic recommendations for the 'right time' to consider moving to the next phase of re-opening our houses of worship:

- ❖ The state has had four weeks or more of declining cases, hospitalizations, and deaths (all three are key indicators of the spread and extent of the virus)
- ❖ Highly effective testing and treatment methods are widely accessible in the state
- ❖ Public health officials, judicatory/ denominational leaders, and the insurance company for the congregation all agree it is advisable to open again for in-person worship.
- ❖ The congregation's leaders have created a detailed plan for preventing the spread of infection in their house of worship, and have the volunteers available to do so, in consultation with the local public health department (additional details are available in "Pandemic Precautions for Congregations and Ministries," revised May 1).
- ❖ An accessibility and inclusion plan has been developed with input from members in higher-risk categories to ensure that the congregation will minister appropriately to everyone when limited-group worship becomes available. (A plan that tells high-risk individuals to just stay home for the next two years while everyone else goes back to 'normal' is not a very inclusive plan).
- ❖ Adequate supplies of hand sanitizer, disinfecting agents, masks, gloves, and other personal protective equipment are readily available for congregational use.



In the meantime, here are a few other ways clergy and congregations may wish to engage further:

Congregations and clergy, as well as other faith leaders and organizations, may wish to participate in the Letter of Affirmation for 'Denominational Leaders Unite,' the statement issued by judicatory leaders across Iowa urging congregations not to re-open their houses of worship at this time.

A 'Virtual Prayer Vigil' continues for this time of continued pandemic. Prayer petitions for an affected sector of society are posted each day, and participants are encouraged to add their own petitions or an 'Amen' or affirmation in the comments.

An earlier document produced by Iowa Faith Leadership Network, "Pandemic Precautions for Congregations and Ministries," may also be helpful. It includes procedures that may be helpful when it is possible to resume limited worship and other activities in your houses of worship. The link to the Google Doc for regular updates is: [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cUQPaeazFs\\_tOZbqUUXzVViZGn5MYz3FAGJJJzjYRfo/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cUQPaeazFs_tOZbqUUXzVViZGn5MYz3FAGJJJzjYRfo/edit?usp=sharing)

A PDF version will also be available via Facebook and our website/ blog, <http://www.iowafaithleaders.org>

Each of the above activities may be found on the Iowa Faith Leadership Network Facebook page, <http://www.facebook.com/iowafaithleaders>

*This document was prepared by Rev. Le Anne Clausen de Montes, M.A., M.Div., Coordinator, on behalf of the Iowa Faith Leadership Network. This document is current as of May 1, 2020, and will be reviewed regularly and revised as needed.*

*The Iowa Faith Leadership Network was created in 2017 to help equip Iowa congregations and ministries across the religious diversity spectrum to engage in practical ecumenical and interfaith cooperation, collegiality, and continuing education opportunities, in order to better serve their local communities. IFLN is a volunteer-run organization with a religiously diverse Steering Committee, and prioritizes the needs and concerns of the smaller congregation in rural and urban areas of Iowa.*