

Protocols for In-Person Worship

Decatur & Concord United Methodist Churches

On September 20, 2020, Bishop Mary Virginia Taylor announced new guidance from the Holston Conference COVID-19 Task Force. This guidance allows for churches to “move back to indoor in-person worship” and gatherings if churches have an approved protocol plan.

While indoor gatherings are allowed, the guidance encourages churches to monitor COVID-19 cases using the Harvard Global Health Institute Metrics. On Thursday the Holston Conference COVID-19 Task Force updates a list of all counties in the conference and lists counties as either green or red based on the COVID-19 metrics. If a county is green, the recommendation is that churches within these counties with approved plans “*may gather for in-person worship indoors.*” “However, if the county text is red, then [the taskforce is] recommending churches” in these counties to “postpone indoor in-person worship.”

Following the guidance of the bishop and the Holston Annual Conference, the Decatur/Concord Charge established a Protocol Planning and Preparation Team (Protocol Team) to make recommendations on regathering for in-person worship. Previously this team has recommended plans for outdoor gatherings. This document is the result of the team’s work and recommendations. There are two main documents that have informed the construction of this document and the work of the Protocol Team:

1. *Taking Steps Forward Faithfully and Safely: A Plan for Returning to In-Person Worship in the Holston Annual Conference during the COVID-19 Pandemic.* This document was created by the Holston Conference and serves as the main guide for these recommendations.
2. *Resuming Care-Filled Worship and Sacramental Life During a Pandemic.* This document was created by an ecumenical group of theologians, scientists, physicians, pastors, bishops and practitioners from United Methodist, Evangelical Lutheran, Episcopal, Pan-Methodist, and Roman Catholic traditions.

In analyzing the spread of COVID-19 and the safety of in-person gatherings, three tools will be used as a guide.

1. COVID Risk Level Map developed by the Harvard Global Health Institute | This tool is used by the Holston Conference to measure the level of community spread in each county.
<https://globalepidemics.org/key-metrics-for-covid-suppression/>
2. COVID-19 Event Risk Assessment Planning Tool developed by Georgia Institute of Technology | This tool gives a county by county risk assessment that at least 1 COVID-19 positive individual will be present at an event.
https://covid19risk.biosci.gatech.edu/?fbclid=IwAR1DIKm0kE1hN6mmq3Q0TA8N5F_IgwSqXlaCYp6FAtLOs0Z4YtMubVMme64
3. Holston Conference county by county opening recommendations based on the Harvard Global Health Institute. <https://www.holston.org/plans-for-in-person-worship>
4. Tennessee Department of Health County Data Snapshot.
<https://www.tn.gov/health/cedep/ncov/data/county-data-snapshot.html>

Guidelines for Indoor Gatherings

Approval of these indoor guidelines allows for the church to move toward indoor gatherings when the leadership and pastor see evidence that such gatherings are prudent, safe, and faithful. Internal guidance will be established to help make these decisions.

Overview of Guidelines

- Masks will be worn at all times while on church property.
- Social distancing will be maintained.
- Hand sanitizer and non-touch trash receptacles will be plentiful.
- A record of attendance and contact information will be maintained for each event and filed with the church office.
- A checklist of COVID procedures will be created and filed with the church office for each event.
- Online and virtual opportunities for connection will be promoted and encouraged.

Detail of Guidelines

Worship may be offered either indoor or outdoor and will continue to be offered online. Worship will be offered only outdoors and online until the congregational survey and volunteers indicate that they are ready to resume inside the building(s). This could happen at different times for both churches. For all outdoor gatherings, the approved document "A Plan for Outdoor Gatherings" will be followed.

The Decatur/Concord protocol team and church council will monitor the trends in COVID-19 cases in our community and surrounding areas using the tools cited above. These tools will be used to make the decision on when to hold indoor events. When indoor events are held, the below protocols are in effect.

1. Basic Protocols
 - a. Those over 65 and those with serious underlying health conditions are encouraged to remain home and participate in online or audio worship.
 - b. People who are symptomatic, have a fever, have been exposed to the virus, or have traveled to a hot spot are to refrain from attending in-person worship for 14 days or until they receive a negative COVID test.
 - c. Social distancing of 6 feet will be observed among households. To help facilitate this, pews will be removed or marked in such a way to ensure proper distance.
 - d. All participants and leaders will have their attendance and contact information recorded as they enter the building. This data will be entered in our electronic database to facilitate contact tracing in the event of a possible exposure.
 - e. All participants and leaders are required to wear a face covering while they are on church property. Participants are encouraged to bring one from home, however, a hospitality volunteer will have a mask for those that do not have one. Those who cannot or refuse to wear a face covering (including young children) will remain at home.
 - i. Alternative face coverings or protection will be explored for our worship leaders to help facilitate those that rely on lip reading to communicate.
2. Facility Protocols
 - a. The church will observe one way in and another way out and the entrance and exit doors are to remain open to limit the need of touching door handles. When the service begins a hospitality member may close the door, but they must remain at the door to open it and ensure a proper face covering for any late comers.

- b. At the entrance, there will be a check-in station where people can register their contact information and receive a mask if they do not already have one.
 - c. Clear signage detailing these protocols and guidance will be displayed around the church.
 - d. Hand sanitizer will be available at multiple locations throughout the building.
 - e. All trash receptacles will be “no touch.”
 - f. Social distancing markers will be placed on the floor in applicable traffic areas to demonstrate proper social distancing.
 - g. Any drinking fountains will be closed.
 - h. Restroom procedures:
 - i. Restroom use will be discouraged.
 - ii. The doors of the main campus restrooms will remain propped open.
 - iii. Signs on proper handwashing will be displayed above the sink area.
 - iv. Following handwashing, people will be asked to disinfect the touch surfaces on the faucet with provided disinfecting wipes.
 - i. The trustees will ensure that adequate ventilation of the worship and gathering spaces is employed. This involves consultation with HVAC professionals on maintaining best practices of ventilation.
 - j. The physical space will be adapted to ensure proper distancing. In the sanctuary pews will be removed or “roped off” to establish distance.
 - k. Once the worship space hits the social distancing occupancy (which is about 25% of full occupancy) no one else is able to enter the worship space. Those who arrive after occupancy is obtained will be informed of this fact and will be invited to worship online. If this happens, multiple worship services can be explored.
 - l. A cleaning schedule of commonly touched areas will be created for volunteers and cleaning staff. If multiple services are deemed necessary it will be contingent upon adequate volunteers to clean and prepare between services, and adequate volunteers to staff both services.
3. Touch surfaces will be minimized.
- a. Online giving will continue to be encouraged and a stationary generosity box will be available for people to make their in-person donations. Money counters will take appropriate precautions of handwashing when handling all financial collections.
 - b. Bulletins and other common items will be kept to a minimum. Pew bible, hymnals, and offering envelopes will be removed from the pews. People are asked to remove all trash or personal items they bring with them to worship.
 - c. Due to the minimizing worship materials and removing hymnals, technology and large displays will be employed when appropriate.
4. Worship Protocols
- a. No children’s church will take place. Children will remain with their parents during worship. Creative ways to engage children will be explored by the worship planning team.
 - b. Following the service, the pastor will remain up front (if possible) or exit to the outdoors to be available to greet, talk, or pray with anyone who wishes. Proper social distancing will continue to be maintained.
 - c. Participants and leaders may receive a temperature check and may be asked recommended COVID screening questions.
 - d. Each week a worship checklist will be completed prior to each service to ensure that these procedures are maintained. This checklist will be kept on file in the church office.

- e. Singing and Music. No choir or congregational singing will be offered. Small ensembles (4 or fewer participants) or soloists, or prerecorded music will be offered with proper distancing.
 - i. Any instrument that requires breath to produce sound will not be used.
 - ii. The church leadership will keep up to date with the ongoing research about the used of music during the pandemic. When new guidance is offered it will be incorporated in practice.
 - f. The congregation will refrain from speaking in unison for prayers or responses.
 - g. Those speaking will have a microphone and will be encouraged to speak at a low voice.
 - h. At the conclusion of the serve, a volunteer will dismiss sections by rows and ask people to exit the facility. People will be asked to keep their face covering until they have entered their private vehicle.
5. Small Groups
- a. The church council (or an agreed subcommittee) may approve various small group, committee, or other group gatherings at the church building. Any group that is approved to meet will only use the assigned facility, which may be a different room that is regularly used. In assigning rooms, attention will be given to the size of group and the need to social distance in the space.
 - b. These groups must follow all protocols.
 - c. A checklist of the protocols and a record of attendance will be filed with the church office.
 - d. Food and drinks will not be served or consumed.
6. Miscellaneous Protocols
- a. The church leadership will continue to monitor attendance and compliance with these COVID protocols and will suggest any necessary revisions.
 - b. St. Mary's Legacy Clinic will continue to operate in the fellowship hall following their COVID procedures.

Additional of Guidelines

St. Mary's Legacy Clinic

St. Mary's Legacy Health Clinic will use fellowship hall and bathrooms as they utilize their own COVID protocols that are attached as an addendum. This has received prior approval by the bishop.

Online Worship

Online and Audio worship will continue to be a viable form of worship for the foreseeable future. The church should plan to resource this form of worship to continue to connect as many people as possible. This learning of online worship will continue following the COVID pandemic to connect more people with the love of Jesus and to connect those who remain homebound.

Funerals

The Christian funeral is a time when the gospel of resurrection is proclaimed in the face of death and the body of the deceased to commended back to God. During this pandemic, a full funeral or celebration of life is unsafe and unwise. These protocols will be maintained:

1. All participants must wear a face covering. This includes the participants of any additional rites or services (military honors will follow their own procedures).

2. The prayer of committal is essential to the Christian service, and this involves the pastor touching the casket or vessel. Only the pastor will touch the casket.
3. Crowds should be kept to a minimum and the congregation and friends should be encouraged to consider alternative means of expressing condolences.
4. Families are encouraged to have graveside committals only.
5. Families will be discouraged from having a public visitation or receiving of friends until a time when large groups are considered safe.
6. Families will be encouraged to consider delaying a full celebration of life until a time when the larger groups are considered safe.
7. When the danger of the pandemic has passed, the congregation might consider holding a church-wide or community service for those who died during the pandemic.
8. Due to the limitation of space, public visitation will not happen at the church.
9. Funerals will only be allowed indoors at the church building if the church is conducting indoor worship and proper cleaning and sanitation can happen before and after the service. If a funeral happens indoor at the church all normal protocols must be followed.

Weddings

All weddings must follow the protocols established for in-person worship.

Addendum A (draft)

Guidelines for Suspension of Indoor In-Person Worship

While the COVID-19 pandemic remains a threat to our communities, it is vital to plan for possible exposure and/or a community spike in COVID cases.

Exposure:

- In the event that someone attended worship and was in their infectious period of COVID-19, the pastor will be made aware, appropriate contact tracing will take place, and in-person church worship services will be suspended for 14 days following the contact.
- If the pastor or pastor's family tests positive for COVID-19 or is exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms prior to a test result, in-person worship will be suspended during the quarantine period if other arrangements cannot be made for worship leadership.

Community Spread of COVID-19:

- It is important to cooperate with health leaders in slowing the spread of COVID-19. Therefore, if there is a demonstrated community spike in COVID cases as reported by the Tennessee Department of Health, indoor worship will be suspended.
- If our county's 7-day running average of new daily COVID-19 cases is 8 or above (approx. 66 per 100,000), indoor worship will be suspended for following the Sunday. It will be standard practice for this decision to be made the Thursday prior to worship to ensure sufficient time to readjust. If indoor worship is suspended, worship could be outdoors (weather permitting) or online.