

COVID-19 Task Force Report

Introduction

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

We are living through a truly unprecedented period in the life of our church, our nation, and the world, and so we have had to take unprecedented measures in response. We have always said that the church is more than a building, and now that conviction is being put to the test. As the Task Force has worked to develop this report, we have kept the following principles in view.

- Communal worship is a foundational practice in the life of our church and should be resumed as soon as it is safe to do so.
- Our church should be a place of comfort and safety for all who enter.
- It is our responsibility to do everything in our power to minimize the potential risks of attending worship or other activities in our building.
- Although we will not be able to eliminate all risk, our approach to reopening the building should err on the side of caution.

SCIENTIFIC ASSUMPTIONS

COVID-19 is a new disease, caused by a novel (or new) coronavirus that has not previously been seen in humans. The virus is thought to spread mainly from person to person through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, sings, breathes, or talks. Masks and social distancing have been proven to be highly effective at reducing the spread of these droplets.

Indoor spaces, particularly those with poor air movement and ventilation, are ideal environments for viral transmission, especially when people remain in such spaces in close contact with others for a prolonged period of time. Because of this, we must take great care to use all means at our disposal to reduce the likelihood of transmission when people gather in our sanctuary and other spaces.

It can take 2-14 days after infection to develop symptoms, so an infected individual can spread the virus for days before they even realize they are infected. A COVID-19 infection can result in a spectrum of disease severity from very mild illness where individuals may remain completely asymptomatic to a very severe respiratory emergency requiring hospitalization. The population most at risk for adverse outcomes are individuals over 65 years-old and those with chronic medical conditions like obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and COPD.

THE TASK FORCE AND ITS WORK

Members of the COVID-19 Task Force include Pastor Anderson, Rebecca Boni, Beth Burgess, Dean Burklund, Gayle Lafferty, Marcus LaPratt, Bob Parrett, and Carrie Rustad. The Task Force met weekly for a period of six weeks as we developed the recommendations provided herein. We reflected together on the latest science, the current state of the virus in our state and region, and the aspects of church life that need to be adapted. We reviewed reports, plans, and communications from other congregations like ours. We conducted a congregation-wide survey to help us gauge the feelings of church members about the possibility of returning to in-person worship in our building. And we worked collaboratively to craft this report.

Recommendations

WHEN TO REOPEN

We recommend aligning our plans with the six-phase approach outlined in the [MI Safe Start Plan](#), which are as follows. This allows us to rely on a clear and easily understood metric in determining the proper timing for reopening. (Note: these are the **MI Safe Start economic engagement phases**, which may differ from **region risk determinations** provided by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services.)

PHASE 1 | Uncontrolled Growth

Increasing number of new cases every day, likely to overwhelm the health system.

PHASE 2 | Persistent spread

Continue to see high case levels with concern about health system capacity.

PHASE 3 | Flattening

Case growth is gradually declining.

PHASE 4 | Improving

Cases, hospitalizations and deaths are clearly declining.

PHASE 5 | Containing

Continued case and death rate improvements and outbreaks can be quickly contained.

PHASE 6 | Post-Pandemic

Community spread not expected to return.

We recommend beginning in-person worship when Oakland County enters PHASE 5.

It is important to note that **PHASE 5** reflects a period of more effective containment of the virus, not any change in its transmissibility. Thus we expect the precautions recommended herein to continue until **PHASE 6**, which will only arrive with some combination of herd immunity, effective treatment, and a widely available vaccine.

We also recommend not beginning in-person worship before Sunday, August 23, at the soonest. This provides us with the time we need to implement these new protocols. If we have not reached **PHASE 5** by that time, we recommend postponing reopening until we do.

HOW TO REOPEN

This process will require the establishment of new patterns and habits associated with our worship gatherings. The roles once performed by our greeters and ushers will change substantially. We recommend the establishment of a **new coordinating team** to oversee the proper implementation of these guidelines from week to week.

Ensure Social Distancing

- All people in pews must sit six feet away from their nearest neighbor in any direction (households may sit together). Seating in overflow areas (e.g., Chapel, Café) should similarly be set up to ensure adequate distance between worshipers.
- Seating capacities
 - **Sanctuary:** 40
(This assumes the balcony is not used.)
 - **Chapel:** 20
 - **Café:** 20
(Tables should be removed to create space for a safe arrangement of chairs.)
- Consider repositioning the pulpit and/or lectern to ensure a safe distance for worship leaders.
- Congregating indoors for fellowship before or after the worship service should be avoided. In order to prevent this, the following steps should be taken:
 - People should be admitted to the building no sooner than necessary before the start of the service, even in the case of inclement weather.
 - People should wait in a socially-distanced line before entering the building.
 - Directional signs should be placed inside the building to ensure one-way traffic flow.
 - People should be ushered directly to their seats before the service and ushered out of their seats by row and directly to the exits after the service.
 - No coffee, tea, or food should be served before or after worship.

Limit the Spread

- Masks/face coverings must be worn over the mouth and nose at all times by everyone over age 5 inside the building. Masks will be provided to worshipers who do not bring their own.
- Choral/congregational singing and unison speaking should be eliminated from the service for the foreseeable future.
- Worshipers must submit to a temperature check and complete a brief health questionnaire before entering the building. The questionnaire can be completed by one person on behalf of the whole household.
- Names will be recorded to keep track of attendance in case it is necessary to notify attendees in the event of possible exposure.
- If we learn that someone who attended worship in our building has tested positive for COVID-19, all persons who were in attendance that day should be made aware of their possible exposure while protecting the identity of the person who tested positive.
- Hand sanitizer should be readily accessible throughout the building.
- Restroom use will be limited to one person at a time.
- Commonly touched items (e.g., Bibles, hymnals, offering plates, etc.) should be removed, and printed worship bulletins (if used) should be spaced on the pews to indicate safe seating locations.
- Weather permitting, the front doors of the church should be propped open.
- All frequently touched surfaces (e.g., railings, pews, elevator buttons, etc.) should be thoroughly cleaned prior to each service with approved disinfectant by member volunteers.

Reduce Risk

- Additional worship service times should be considered in order to spread out attendance.
- If there are multiple services, a team of volunteers should clean/disinfect key areas between services.
- Worshipers should be offered a means of signing up to attend worship to ensure attendance remains at or below safe capacity.
- Services should be shortened to prevent prolonged exposure to stagnant, indoor air.
- At-risk populations should be encouraged to stay at home until **PHASE 6** of the reopening process.
- Live-streaming worship services should continue indefinitely.
- Methods to improve air flow and air exchange in the sanctuary should be investigated.
- Communicate clear guidance for individuals, such as:
 - Stay home if you are feeling sick.
 - Wash hands regularly and avoid touching your face.
 - Limit restroom use whenever possible.
- Signs should be placed on all building entrances asking people who are feeling sick not to enter the building.

OUTDOOR WORSHIP

If a suitable location can be secured, Sunday worship at an outdoor location (e.g., Czapski's parking lot and Book Clinic hill, Central Park Pavilion, etc.) may be considered in **PHASE 4**. Masks must be worn and social distancing observed. (Recent experience with an outdoor funeral service at the Central Park Pavilion suggests that intentional effort will have to be made to ensure proper social distancing; it cannot be assumed that people will do so on their own.)

BAPTISM AND THE LORD'S SUPPER

By definition, the sacraments are tactile rituals which require sharing and proximity. We cannot easily remove the tangible elements or the gathered community and still maintain the full meaning of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Neither can we simply omit these practices from the worshipping life of the church. It is with these challenging tensions in mind that we make the following recommendations.

Baptism

- Session should consider permitting baptisms to take place in locations other than the sanctuary and at times other than during Sunday worship.
- A small number of church members should be present for the baptism in order to represent the congregation as a whole and to make the baptismal promises on their behalf.
- Pastor Anderson can work with the parents of the child to be baptized (or, in the case of an adult baptism, with the person her- or himself) to make safe and suitable arrangements.
- The baptism should be video recorded and shared with the congregation during a subsequent worship service.

The Lord's Supper

- The Worship Committee should develop a plan for sharing Communion when in-person gatherings resume. This plan should ensure that the elements remain free from possible contamination at every stage of preparation and distribution.
- Communion should continue to be celebrated remotely for the foreseeable future.

CHURCH GROUPS

Small groups, such as Bible studies and committees, can begin gathering in the building as soon as they wish, provided they observe the following precautions.

- In order to ensure that the building is clean for Sunday worship, no church groups are permitted to use the building on Friday or Saturday.
- Masks are required when inside the building.
- Group members should use the Liberty Street door to enter and exit the building.
- Group meetings must be planned ahead and cleared on the church calendar to ensure that meetings do not overlap and are properly spaced out.
- Groups may choose to use the Café or Fellowship Hall.
- Groups are asked to clean all touched surfaces (tables, chairs, door handles, handrails, etc.) after using the building (cleaning supplies will be provided).
- Group members should not arrive earlier than necessary, nor linger longer than necessary.
- Restroom use should be limited as much as possible.
- For the purposes of contact tracing, a group member should write the names of all those in attendance and the space(s) used and share that list with the church office.

OUTSIDE GROUPS

We do not recommend opening the building for use by outside groups at this time. We recommend that the session revisit this question once we have had some time to adjust to the new protocols of building use and can safely ensure regular cleaning and the availability of necessary supplies.

WEDDINGS AND FUNERALS

Weddings

Weddings may be held in the building once we reach **PHASE 5**. Unless a wedding will have fewer than 40 guests in attendance, it is recommended that weddings take place outdoors rather than in the sanctuary. Weddings that take place in the church building must adhere to the same precautions prescribed herein for worship services, with the following additions.

- Pastor Anderson should stand a safe distance from the couple while conducting the ceremony.
- Attendants of the bride and groom should be spaced at least six feet apart from one another.
- The bride and groom may remove their masks for the ceremony.

Funerals

Funerals and memorial services may be held in the building once we reach **PHASE 5**. Services that take place in the church building must adhere to the same precautions prescribed herein for worship services. The option of live-streaming should be made available.

RENEWING THE SUSPENSION OF CHURCH ACTIVITIES

We have learned that meeting together in our sanctuary is one of the highest-risk activities during an active pandemic. Because of this, we should be among the last to return to operation when the risk of transmission diminishes, and we should be among the first to suspend operation should the risk begin to increase again.

If at any point Oakland County moves backward from **PHASE 5** to **PHASE 4**, we recommend that the session consider renewing the suspension of in-person worship and other church activities, while still allowing small groups to use the building.

If Oakland County moves to **PHASE 3**, we strongly recommend the immediate suspension of all in-person activities.

Further Considerations

PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

In determining when it is safe to resume in-person activities for our children and youth, it is important that we take into consideration not only the safety of the young people, but also the safety of the adult volunteers who work with them. Additionally, we must recognize that younger children will have a harder time abiding by social distancing guidelines than older children will, and the youngest children cannot be expected to do so at all.

Youth Group

When we reach **PHASE 5**, the Youth Group may resume meeting in person while maintaining social distance and observing appropriate precautions (e.g., masks). Parental support is expected in helping the students follow safety procedures. We recommended that they (A) gather in the Youth Room with the windows or stage doors open, (B) in a larger space (e.g., Fellowship Hall, Chapel, Café), or (C) outside (outdoor activities may be considered during **PHASE 4**). Activities such as games and meals, which could result in a high level of interpersonal contact, should be carefully planned to ensure the safety of everyone involved.

Sunday School

We recommend taking some extra time after **PHASE 5** begins to assess the number of children expected to be in attendance from week to week and to explore options for restarting our Sunday School program in such a way that ensures the safety of both children and volunteers. Local school districts may offer helpful guidance.

Nursery

The nursery should remain closed until **PHASE 6**.

THE CHURCH'S MISSION

Since the pandemic began, so much effort has been put into making sure that the basics of worship and congregational care have been adequately addressed. This is, for now, as it should be. But since we are unlikely to see a swift end to the spread of the novel coronavirus, we should also not lose sight of our larger purpose and mission as a church:

Growing in faith, serving in love, living in Christ, and extending God's gracious welcome to all.

The programs and activities that we have relied upon in the past to fulfill our mission may not be safe to return to for a season. In the meantime, we need to continue to seek new and creative ways to serve our community and share the love of God with others. This unique moment of history is also a unique opportunity: a chance for us as the Body of Christ to grow, adapt, and innovate in ways that we would never have thought possible.

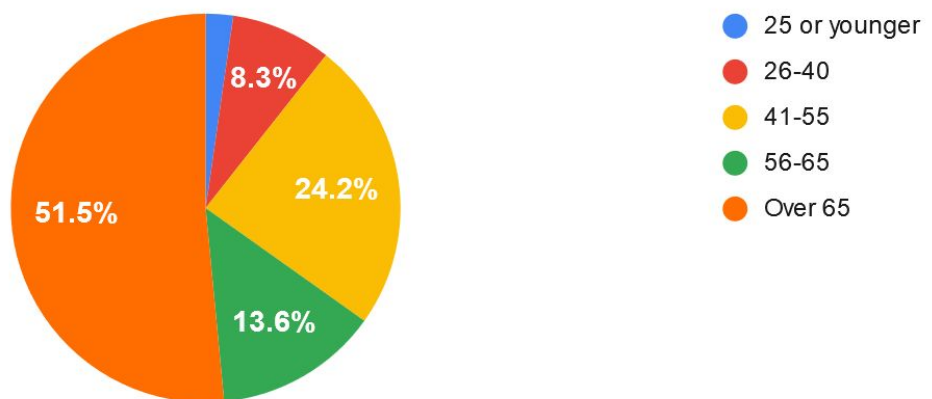
Resources

SURVEY SUMMARY

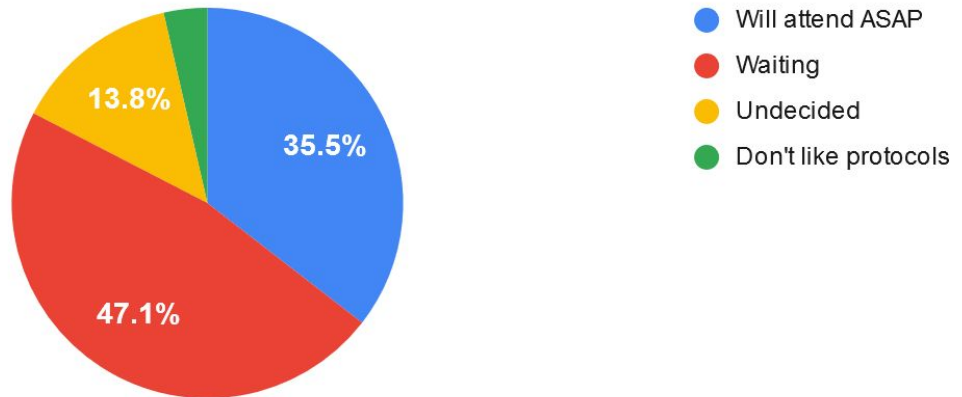
Survey Information

- We received a total of 148 responses (approximately 10 of these were duplicates and were removed from the data where possible).
- Some responses were completed by couples or families; most were completed by individuals or were anonymous.
- The survey was conducted exclusively online, which may have altered results slightly by eliminating anyone who has technology barriers.
- Comments are synthesized and do not include each individual response.
- A large percentage (nearly 40%) of the over-65 and/or vulnerable population indicated that they wish to return to worship in the building sooner than many of the other age groups.

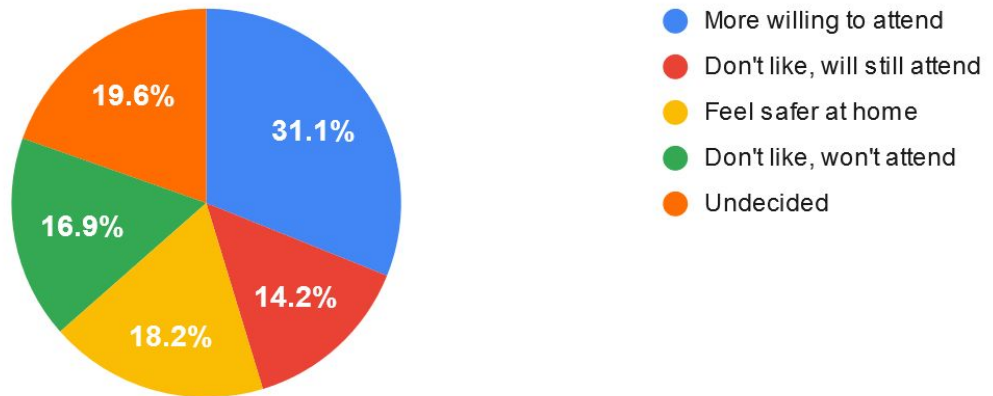
Respondents' Age Group



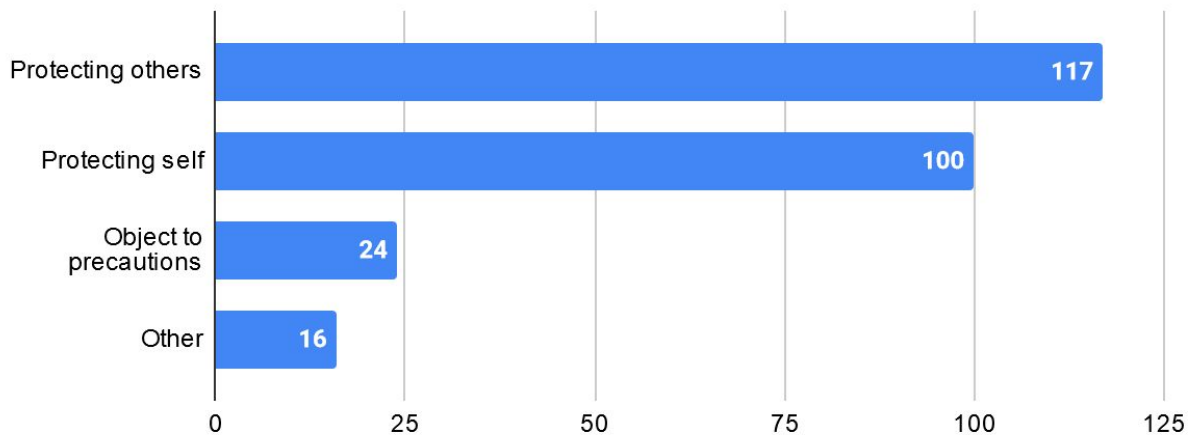
Attitudes Toward Returning



Worshipping with Precautions in Place



Important Factors Affecting Decision



Worship Setting

- **91%** of respondents are willing to worship at a different time.
- **60%** of respondents are willing to worship in an overflow space (e.g., Chapel or Café).

Other Takeaways

- Many are happy and/or feel more comfortable because of precautions being taken and the church's concern for everyone's safety.
- A few address their additional concerns at home and/or at work and how they see in-person worship affecting and being affected by their precautions/exposures.
- Some are frustrated with not opening soon enough or masking/precautions in general.
- Some are looking for more connection through various bible studies, small meetings, calls, or other interactions with church leaders and members.
- Some address the ease/convenience of streaming service and request to maintain streaming services for some time.
- Some voice uncertainty about what will happen in the fall and concern for the safety of others.
- There are numerous comments of gratitude for church members, the sense of community, Pastor Anderson, Marcus's visits, and that the survey was done.

LINKS OF INTEREST

- Oakland County COVID-19 Dashboard
oakgov.com/covid/dashboard.html
- MI Safe Start Map
mistartmap.info
- MI Safe Start Plan
michigan.gov/documents/whitmer/MI_SAFE_START_PLAN_689875_7.pdf