

EMBRACE THE NOW, PREPARE FOR THE NEXT: A PLAN FOR RESUMING IN-PERSON WORSHIP IN THE VIRGINIA CONFERENCE

May 13, 2020 — updated May 22, 2020

We are in the midst of an historic, disruptive time as our nation and our churches have responded to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. We have learned how God can work in us and how we can be a church without the church building. Though these have been painful times, we embrace the new things we have learned and the practices that have sustained us.

As we prepare for the next stages in our journey with God, we want to remember John Wesley's 3 Simple Rules:

Do No Harm—We recognize that the following plan and its supporting material may seem cumbersome, restrictive, and even somewhat scary. However, we are outlining these details because we value the health and wellbeing of all God's people, especially the vulnerable ones. As churches, we pray that no one will be endangered or placed at unnecessary risk, just as we desire that others would do the same to us (Luke 6:31).

Do Good— By implementing the following plan, with God's help, we seek to do all the good we can to others. This is our prayerful effort to spread God's love, not harm. To this end, we submit ourselves to Spirit-led self-discipline (2 Tim. 1:7) so that others may be blessed by our love-filled actions.

Stay in Love with God —We long for the return to in-person worship as one of the most important means of staying in love with God (Jn. 4:23-24, Heb. 10:25). In order to offer this precious means of grace in the safest possible way, we have relied on the best wisdom we can glean from medical, church, governmental, and legal resources. We offer the following plan, praying that in coming weeks and years more and more people will come to know the love of God and passionately stay in it.

We will resume in-person worship gradually and with great care. Even when we move into more moderate restrictions, we recognize that regional outbreaks may require some or all of our churches to return to more severe restrictions. Based on the severity of the outbreak in a particular district or a part of a district, District Superintendents may use their discretion in delaying implementation of any stage below until conditions allow.

As of May 13, 2020, the Northern Virginia region will stay in the Commonwealth's Phase 0 and they will not be moving into Stage 1, as defined below.

We are confident, however, that we can work together, building on where we have been and preparing for what comes next.

NOTE: This is a summary document. All requirements, rules, protocols, and guidance noted below are found in the Handbook for Local Churches that is posted here: www.vaumc.org/return.

Preparation Stage

Timeline: Immediately

Worship Options: No in-person worship, Online/conference call worship
Development of Healthy Church Team - Consideration of willingness/ability to be a pioneer church

All Churches will create a **Healthy Church Team (HCT)** to prepare for the time when they are able to offer in-person worship. Some churches have already been doing great work to prepare and their existing teams should continue as an HCT. The HCT will provide advice and counsel to the lead Pastor and the Chair of Trustees, Church Council, and S/PPRC. The HCT should include representatives of the Trustees and the Hospitality/Greeters Team, the Pastor, a medical professional, a lawyer, and others as needed. In churches where there are no medical professionals or lawyers, outside consultancy should be sought.

Requirements, rules, protocols, and guidelines for HCTs can be found in the Handbook for Local Churches on the Virginia Conference website at: www.vaumc.org/return. All HCTs must adhere to this document.

The Healthy Church Team will coordinate with the pastors, staff, volunteers, and the District Superintendent on a number of issues associated with creating a plan for in-person worship. Consideration should be given to preparing the building, accommodating worship to strict distancing (6 feet or more) and sanitation protocols [as outlined in Attachment C in the Handbook], and communicating plans with the congregation and community. Churches should determine their readiness, willingness, and ability to move to different forms of worship, including whether they can be a pioneer church. **No churches will conduct in-person worship during this Preparation Stage.**

Definition: Pioneer churches are those churches that agree to follow the strict distancing and sanitation protocols [Attachment C in the Handbook], to move gradually into in-person worship during Stage 1, and to communicate their learnings and best practices. Churches should indicate to the District Superintendent their willingness to be considered for this role. After sharing their plans for approval with the DS, a small initial number of churches will be selected in Stage 1 with the number expanding as we learn.

Stage 1

Timeline: May 24 (except Northern Virginia and other regions where District Superintendent discerns need to delay)

Worship Options: **Drive-In Worship, Online/conference call services, and Pioneer Churches Only**

- A. Drive-In Worship—Beginning on May 24, 2020, every church that wants to have members gather in the church parking lot or any other parking lot, must follow the Drive-In Worship requirements [Attachment B in the Handbook for Local Churches]

- B. Online/Conference Call Services—If the church is already conducting online services, are there other ministries that can be conducted using Livestream, Zoom or conference calls?

- C. Pioneer Churches—During this Phase, gatherings will be restricted to 25 persons or less (Clergy, worship leaders, and other assistants excluded). Note that this is a more restricted number than the allowable gathering size in the state guidelines. A small number of churches representing different regions, facilities, and congregational sizes that have indicated their willingness and ability to act as pioneer churches will be asked to begin enacting the plans developed during the Preparation Phase using the Strict Protocol [Attachment C in the Handbook]. Churches may experiment with gatherings on multiple days and, if the church campus allows, multiple services of 25 or less held simultaneously in different parts of the building, ensuring no commingling of participants. As we continue to learn from these churches during this phase, other churches may be added. Churches operating in this phase would agree to:
 - Begin with Soft Start Experiences (invited persons to run through a test service) on weeknights
 - Hold a Service of Word and Table at least once in this phase
 - Solicit input and identify issues
 - Monitor Implementation of requirements in Handbook for Local Churches on the Conference Website
 - Report to Council and District Superintendent
 - Weekly Zoom meeting with DS and clergy/lay church leaders of pioneer churches and other churches preparing to re-open in future phases to report on issues/learnings/best practices and any COVID-19 exposure reported by congregants or staff
 - District Superintendents will communicate progress with the Assistant to the Bishop.

Stage 2 Timeline: TBD Determined by Bishop but subsequent to Governor’s announcement that the state is moving into Phase 2

Worship Options: **Drive-In Worship, Online/conference call services, and Additional Churches meeting**

- A. All churches with Average Worship Attendance of 50 or less could resume worship following Strict Protocol [Attachment C in the Handbook]

- B. Additional medium and large churches as solicited and identified by District Superintendents could also meet using the gathering rule of '50 or less'
- C. No Church should feel obligated to open.
- D. Virtual service options should be maintained.

Stage 3 Timeline: TBD Determined by Bishop but subsequent to Governor's announcement that the state is moving into Phase 3

Worship Options: All Churches can resume worship in accordance with prevailing state gathering restrictions using the New Normal Protocol [Attachment D in the Handbook]

The Bishop's Back to In-Person Worship Workgroup

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Mr. Steve Brown, Conference Chancellor
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The Rev. Jennifer Coffey, pastor, Fairview UMC, Danville
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