



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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May 4, 2021

MEMORANDUM

TO: Pastors & Lay Leaders of the New York Annual Conference

FROM: Thomas J. Bickerton, Resident Bishop

RE: Re-Opening Updates

Dear Friends & Colleagues,

Peace and blessings are extending to each of you today. My prayer is that you are filled with the deep awareness of God's grace and love in your lives.

As you know, the headlines are full of news concerning the re-opening of our region as we anticipate a "post-Covid" world. In a joint press conference yesterday, the Governors of Connecticut, New York and New Jersey announced a coordinated effort which begins to aggressively re-open our region on May 19, 2021. Yet, as we know, the news is also reporting the grim reports of severe Covid-19 outbreaks in places like India and Brazil. These reports remind us that we are not yet there. The need for our deliberate actions and intentional prayers remain.

We are moving into a new phase in the re-opening of our churches for worship and ministry. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recently issued new public health recommendations in light of the growing number of persons who have been fully vaccinated. Persons who have been fully vaccinated may visit with other fully vaccinated people and are now allowed to participate in outdoor services without a mask.

It is clear that the best way for any congregation to resume full activity is to work to ensure that each member of your congregation is fully vaccinated.

Congregations in Connecticut

The latest information from the State of Connecticut is as follows:

- On May 19, 2021 all restrictions are being lifted with the exception of wearing masks.
- New recommendations for safe operation of indoor and large outdoor events will be issued on May 19, 2021.

Congregations in New York

The latest information from the State of New York is as follows:

- Capacity limits for houses of worship will be lifted on May 19, 2021.
- Social distancing, masks, health screenings, and all other state Health/Safety protocols remain in effect.
- Office capacity limits are being replaced with space available to maintain six feet of social distancing.
- The “micro-zone” strategy has been rescinded in light of the state’s progress.

General Guidelines

In the meantime, congregations that have already or are considering re-opening must continue to follow these previously established guidelines:

1. Wearing of face masks and social distanced seating and interaction will still be required.
2. Maintaining a log of those in attendance in worship or employees that are present over time.
3. Social distancing markers, signage, and traffic flow markers are still encouraged.
4. Facilities should continue to increase the percentage of outdoor air that circulates into the facility.
5. Frequent hand washing with appropriate stations for doing so provided.
6. Those who are leading worship/singing should continue to honor the 12-foot distancing protocol.

Items that will now be permitted:

1. Indoor singing will be allowed as long as all congregants wear an appropriate, tight-fitting mask.
2. Offices are allowed to re-open at 100% capacity in Connecticut.
3. Congregations are encouraged to plan outdoor worship experiences and other activities. If you are on church property, it is expected that you will wear a mask. Planning for summer events such as Vacation Bible School is allowed with further updates on restrictions being offered later this month.

Items that are still NOT permitted:

1. Serving of Holy Communion other than with individual cups/bread. No common cup or single loaf distribution is allowed. Bread and juice must be offered in individual containers.
2. Fellowship meals or fund-raising dinners with covered dishes, buffets, etc. “Grab and go” meals for fund-raising, food distribution are allowed.
3. Public greetings during worship that involve close interaction with one another (i.e., hugging, handshaking, etc.).
4. Fellowship/coffee hours before or after worship.

The Operation of the Conference Center

The staff of the United Methodist Center have made the commitment to be fully vaccinated. The achievement of this action will result in your conference staff being once again fully operational in-person.

However, the availability of hosting in-person meetings at the conference center will still be restricted to

those who have been fully vaccinated. If you are a visitor you will be asked to produce your vaccination card. This is for the protection of everyone involved and, most especially, the extended families of our staff who could still contract the virus from a fully vaccinated person who can still carry and transmit the disease to others.

We have increased our capability of ZOOM meetings to be conducted from the Conference Center with technology that allows interaction to take place from one centralized computer rather than individual stations. This means that fully vaccinated people can gather at 20 Soundview while easily engaging with other members through ZOOM. The cabinet has been conducting these "hybrid" meetings recently and have found the new technology to be effective. If there are groups that want to schedule such a meeting, it will require the careful navigation of the meeting date with someone from the staff who can engage the technology.

Responding to the Need Globally

The Covid-19 pandemic has negatively affected health systems globally, crippling service delivery in both high and low-resource countries. This is especially true currently in India where the case count has risen dramatically and placed a severe strain on health systems that are running drastically low on essential drugs and medical equipment that is needed.

The General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) and the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) are responding to this health crisis in India by supporting long-term partners who are working on the ground in emergency humanitarian and health response.

In order to address this critical emerging need, GBGM and UMCOR are once again promoting its **UMCOR COVID-19 Response Fund. We are asking individuals and local congregations to promote giving to the fund (Advance #3022612).** [Contributions can be sent through the NYAC Conference Center, online](#) or by mail to: Global Ministries/UMCOR, P.O. Box 9068, New York, NY 10087-9068 (the Advance number above should be written on the memo line).

In the midst of our own struggles, we once again have the opportunity to demonstrate the strength of our connectional church by reaching out with a helping hand to those who need us most.

Final Remarks

The CDC states clearly that each of us should consider how COVID-19 is spread in our communities and that safe choices and full vaccination should be the guiding principles in any consideration moving forward. This involves consideration of outdoor activities, the number of people participating, and the location of activities taking place.

It must be emphasized once again that the easiest pathway for us to successfully and completely re-open our churches for mission, ministry, outreach and worship is to work tirelessly to encourage everyone in our communities and within our churches to get fully vaccinated.

The vaccines are available. Words of encouragement, offers of transportation, and demonstrations of leaders taking the initiative to get vaccinated will go a long way in achieving this goal.

It is our longing to reach a point where our congregations can once again be fully operational. The need is great for us to be able to see where we can once again thrive and where we will have to make adjustments based on the effect that Covid-19 has had on our communities of faith. It will not be a return to a pre-Covid existence. Things have changed and we will need to adapt to those changes with creativity

and hopefulness.

The writer of I Peter once wrote:

“But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”

(I Peter 3:14-16)

Dear friends, these remain challenging and difficult days. And yet, we hold our hope in the resurrecting power of Jesus Christ to provide a clear and undeniable pathway through the obstacles that we face. Do what is right. Hold fast to your faith. And with gentleness and reverence, joyfully proclaim that with Christ, all things are possible.

With this letter, I send along my sincere prayers for each one of you.

The Journey Continues, . . .



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