



Desert Heritage Church Phased Plan for Resuming In-Person Gatherings Adapted from the Southwest Conference's Plan



“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...” Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

The wisdom writer from the Hebrew Scriptures reminds us that there is a time for every season and matter, including when and how to resume in-person gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic. Decisions about resuming in-person gatherings in your church rest in your hands, not in the hands of government officials or of the Southwest Conference staff. This resource has been designed as a starting point for meaningful conversation among your local church leaders as you develop your own protocol or policy for resuming public gatherings. It reflects our deep and abiding love for one another and for our neighbors and highlights our common desire to nurture the health and welfare of the people in our congregations and our communities.

This protocol reflects the work of the Rev. Dr. Ginny Brown Daniel, Conference minister of the Missouri Mid-South Conference United Church of Christ. Her research led her to suggest five phases for returning to public gatherings. Dr. Brown Daniel writes:

Please note these phases may not be linear in nature. Given the fact that the CDC anticipates a second wave of COVID-19 infections, **your church leadership should be prepared for an increase in infections at which point you return to Phase 1 and follow this protocol accordingly.**

A day will come when self-exile from our church buildings can end. When we do return to gathering in-person we will do so in small and measured ways at first. Not all churches will resume in-person gatherings at the same time. Group sizes will be limited because we will need to follow public health and medical best practices and maintain social distancing. Some people will return to public activities only when they personally feel safe doing so, thus ministry in virtual ways will need to continue even after the pandemic is declared to be over. Major adjustments, including wearing masks, will be necessary for many reasons, among them, helping people feel safe being together. This is a time to prepare ourselves for these and other eventualities.

Pages 6/7 provide charts of this Phased Plan for your convenience.

This document is just a starting point for your conversations. Undoubtedly you will want to develop your own church-specific protocol for resuming in-person gatherings. Included here are questions for your conversations when discussing resumption of in-person gatherings.

A Five Phase Plan for Resuming Church In-Person Gatherings

Phase One **Stay-at-Home Order by City/County/State, or
Number of new COVID-19 cases continues to hold steady or increases**

- Online Worship only
- Online Meetings only
- Church Office and Building Closed completely
- Staff is working from home



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Phase Two 2 Weeks of Downward Trend of COVID Case Counts in Maricopa County Widespread availability of testing No PPE shortage for in-person gathering participants

- Limited in-person worship of 10 people¹ maximum appropriately distanced (paired with online worship) Masks, gloves, no rituals involving touch, no singing.
- Limited group recording of worship, 10 people² maximum appropriately distanced, no touching
- Online Meetings only
- Church Office closed

Phase Three 4 Weeks of Downward Trend of COVID-19 Case Counts in Maricopa County Widespread availability of testing No PPE shortage for in-person gathering participants

- In-Person Worship of 25 people maximum
 - Continue holding online worship along with in-person worship of no more than 25 people.
 - Encourage those at high-risk to worship online.³
 - In-person worship should have space large enough to allow for physical distancing of 6 feet between households with the following suggestions:
 - One household per pew/row with an empty pew/row separating every household.
 - Every other pew/row is blocked off in order to create 6-foot physical distancing requirement.
 - Assess worship space in advance in order to ensure physical distancing requirements can be met before, during, and after worship.
 - Develop a plan if more than 25 people come for in-person worship
 - Face masks are required of all in-person worship attendees! (including children)
- No Congregational Singing at In-Person Worship
 - The CDC identifies singing as a high-risk action during this pandemic, therefore we recommend no congregational singing. If you wish to bring music into your service, we recommend pre-recorded music or a musical selection brought to the congregation by one or two appropriately distanced individuals. If any live music is performed in the service, we recommend the congregation be AT LEAST 15 feet back from the singer(s).
- No Personal Touch Rituals at In-Person Worship, including the following:
 - No Passing the peace of Christ
 - No Fellowship pads, hymnals, and pew Bibles should be used
 - No Children come forward for a lesson. Children remain safely with their household during the children's message.
 - No Offering plate usage (see below for alternatives)
 - No Communion plate or intinction (see below for alternatives)
- Usher Distance
 - All ushers must maintain physical distance of 6 feet and wear masks.

¹ All persons present (children, youth, and adults) are included in this maximum number.

² All persons present (children, youth, and adults) are included in this maximum number.

³ High Risk includes those age 60 or older, those with auto-immune challenges, those identified as high-risk by your county's Department of Health.



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- It is suggested that ushers wear gloves in order to provide an additional layer of safety for worship participants and ushers. (see below for additional suggestions for ushers)
- No Fellowship (coffee hour etc.) gatherings before or after worship
- No Nursery During Worship
 - In order to ensure the safety of all children and nursery workers during physical distancing, we recommend all children remain with their families during worship.
- No In-Person Small Group Meetings
 - No Sunday School, bible studies, youth gatherings.

Phase Four **8 Weeks of Downward Trend COVID-19 Case Counts in Maricopa County , or Zero reported new COVID-19 cases Widespread availability of testing No PPE Shortage for in-person gathering participants**

- In-Person Worship (no more than 50 people worshipping in-person)
 - Continue holding online worship along with in-person worship of no more than 50 people.
 - Encourage those at high-risk to worship online.³
 - In-person worship should have space large enough to allow for physical distancing of 6 feet between households with the following suggestions:
 - One household per pew/row with an empty pew/row separating every household.
 - Every other pew/row is blocked off in order to create 6-foot physical distancing requirement.
 - Assess worship space in advance in order to ensure physical distancing requirements can be met before, during, and after worship.
 - Develop a plan if more than 50 people come for in-person worship
 - Face masks are required of all in-person worship attendees!
- Limited Congregational Singing at In-Person Worship
 - The CDC identifies singing as a high-risk action during this pandemic, therefore we recommend limited congregational singing. If you wish to bring music into your service, we recommend pre-recorded music or a musical selection performed by one or two appropriately distanced individuals. We recommend the congregation be AT LEAST 15 feet back from the singer(s).
 - If congregational singing is used during worship, we recommend all singing to be done while everyone wears masks.
- No Personal Touch Rituals of In-Person Worship (including the following)
 - No Passing of the Peace of Christ
 - No Fellowship pad, hymnals, and pew Bibles should be used
 - No Children come forward for a lesson. Children remain safely with their household during the children's message.
 - No Offering plate usage (see below for alternatives)
 - No Communion plate or intinction (see below for alternatives)
 - Usher Distance
 - All ushers must maintain physical distance of 6 feet.
- Limited Fellowship food before or after worship. Masks are worn. No touching.
- Limited In-Person Small Group Meetings.⁴

⁴ Church leaders should assess the maximum number of small group participants appropriate for your church.



Desert Heritage Church Phased Plan for Resuming In-Person Gatherings Adapted from the Southwest Conference's Plan



- No Sunday School, bible studies, youth gatherings.

Phase Five Vaccine Developed and Provided to Whole Population, or "Herd Immunity" Achieved

- All in-person church activities can be observed only AFTER (a) a vaccine for COVID-19 has been developed and is widely provided to the entire population of your community,, or (b) public health officials certify that our population has achieved "herd immunity."

A Plan If COVID Cases Increase

If COVID-19 infections increase in your county at any time, your Church should immediately suspend in-person gatherings and return to Phase 1 of the SWC Phased Reopening Plan.

Multiple Worship Recommendations for Cleaning

If you have multiple worship services in order to limit the amount of people worshipping/meeting in person, the following suggestions should be considered:

- Allow time for people from the first service to leave so that you can fully clean worship space before allowing worship attenders of next service to enter.
- Develop a plan to clean all areas between services including sanctuary, bathrooms, choir room, entry area/narthex.
- Close off all rooms not needed for worship such as Sunday School rooms, nursery, kitchens, closets.

Some Alternatives for Worship Rituals Involving Touch

1. Peace of Christ
 - a. Wave to people from their seats.
 - b. Remain in place during the Passing of the Peace of Christ.
2. Time with the Children
 - a. Have Children remain in their seats with their households while the leader speaks from the front.
3. Offering
 - a. Provide online giving options.
 - b. Provide stationary offering receptacles in the worship space
 - c. Provide envelopes in pews/chairs and have members place checks in the envelope.
 - d. After the service, the usher (with gloves and mask) will retrieve donations from seats or stationary receptacles.
4. Communion
 - a. Have worship attenders bring their own bread and liquid.
 - b. If prepared by church leaders, someone wearing gloves and a mask places bread and liquid in a Ziplock bag. Bags are handed to participants upon entry by someone wearing gloves and a mask.
 - c. Use prepackaged communion elements and maintain appropriate touch precautions when distributing them
5. Pew Hymnals/Pew Bibles



**Desert Heritage Church
Phased Plan for Resuming In-Person Gatherings
Adapted from the Southwest Conference's Plan**



- a. Print everything in a bulletin or PowerPoint (using the appropriate copyright information for such usage).
- b. Project words on screens/walls
- c. Recorded Music



Desert Heritage Church
Phased Plan for Resuming In-Person Gatherings
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Suggested In-Person Worship Phases

Activity	Phase 1 <i>Stay at Home Order</i>	Phase 2 <i>2 weeks declining new COVID cases</i>	Phase 3 <i>4 weeks declining new COVID cases</i>	Phase 4 <i>8 weeks declining new COVID cases</i>	Phase 5 <i>Vaccine distributed to all population</i>
In-Person Worship	No	Yes 10 max	Yes 25 max	Yes 50 max	Yes
Congregational Singing	No	No	No	Limited; with masks	Yes
Peace of Christ	No	No	No	No	Yes
Time With Children	No	No	No	Limited	Yes
Offering	No	No	No	No	Yes
Communion	No	No	No	No	Yes
Hymnals/Pew Bibles	No	No	No	No	Yes
Nursery	No	No	No	Limited	Yes
Bulletins	No	Yes 1-time use	Yes 1-time use	Yes 1-time use	Yes
Fellowship Before/After	No	No	No	Limited	Yes
In-Person Sunday School/ Confirmation/ youth gathering event	No	No	No	Limited	Yes

Suggested In-Person Church Events

Activity	Phase 1 <i>Stay at Home Order, or increasing COVID cases</i>	Phase 2 <i>2 weeks declining new COVID cases</i>	Phase 3 <i>4 weeks declining new COVID cases</i>	Phase 4 <i>8 weeks declining new COVID cases</i>	Phase 5 <i>Vaccine distributed to all population</i>
In-Person Worship or recording	No	Yes 10 max	Yes 25 max	Yes 50 max	Yes
Physical Distance	Yes	6 feet	6 feet	3 feet	No
Personal Touch Rituals	No	No	No	Limited	Yes
Food Events	No	No	No	No	Yes
In-Person Meetings	No	No	No	Limited	Yes
Office Opened to Public	No	No	No	Limited	Yes
Mission/Ministry Events	No	No	No	Limited	Yes
Church Rentals ⁵	No	No	Yes 25 max	Yes 50 max	Yes

⁵ Decisions about renting your building are yours to make. This is a suggested guideline for your leadership discussion.



Desert Heritage Church
Phased Plan for Resuming In-Person Gatherings
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Suggested COVID Case Increase Plan⁶

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5
<i>If your church is in this phase and the trend of new COVID cases begins to rise...</i>	<i>Stay at Home Order, or new COVID</i>	<i>2 weeks declining COVID cases</i>	<i>4 weeks declining COVID cases</i>	<i>8 weeks declining COVID cases</i>	<i>Vaccine distributed to all population</i>
In-Person Worship	Online only	Return Phase 1 to	Return Phase 1 to	Return Phase 1 to	Institute mitigation tactics
Physical Distance	Not applicable	Return Phase 1 to	Return Phase 1 to	Return Phase 1 to	Institute mitigation tactics
Personal Touch Rituals	Not applicable	Return Phase 1 to	Return Phase 1 to	Return Phase 1 to	Institute mitigation tactics
Food Events	Not applicable	Return Phase 1 to	Return Phase 1 to	Return Phase 1 to	Institute mitigation tactics
In-Person Meetings	Online only	Return Phase 1 to	Return Phase 1 to	Return Phase 1 to	Institute mitigation tactics
Office Open to the Public	No	Return Phase 1 to	Return Phase 1 to	Return Phase 1 to	Institute mitigation tactics
Mission/Ministry Events	No	Return to Phase 1	Return to Phase 1	Return to Phase 1	Institute mitigation tactics
Church Rentals	No	Return to Phase 1	Return to Phase 1	Return to Phase 1	Institute mitigation tactics

Suggested Requirements for In-Person Worship Leaders:⁷

- Do NOT meet the [CDC criteria for people who are higher risk for sever illness](#).
- Willing to wear gloves and mask and observe physical distancing
- Willing to have temperature taken before worship

⁶ If there is an increase in COVID-19 positive cases, it is recommended that your church return to phase 1 of the SWC Phased Reopening Plan and repeat the phases based on the number of weeks without an increase in COVID cases.

⁷ This includes but is not limited to: ushers, ministers, worship leaders, choir director, and choir members. It is not a requirement that those older than 60 not lead worship. However, the CDC has counseled that this age group is at a higher risk for infection.



Desert Heritage Church Phased Plan for Resuming In-Person Gatherings Adapted from the Southwest Conference's Plan



Prayer for Resuming In-Person Gatherings

Divine Wisdom, visit our leaders with your guidance and courage as they make decisions about how and when to resume hosting in-person church gatherings. Protect the health and vitality of our families and our neighbors. Thank you for your call to serve our communities in these times benevolently and with leadership. In your healing love we pray, Amen.

Sources Consulted

Center for Disease Control

- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/community-mitigation-strategy.pdf>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-at-higher-risk.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/guidance-community-faith-organizations.html>

Arizona Department of Health Services

- <https://www.azdhs.gov/>

New Mexico Department of Health

- <https://cv.nmhealth.org/>

El Paso County Public Health

- <https://www.elpasocountyhealth.org/>

Wisconsin Council of Churches resource

- <https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/>

State of Wisconsin Reentry Plan

- <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p02653a.pdf>

United Church of Christ resource on reopening

- https://www.ucc.org/daily_covid_19_brief_issue_26
- <https://www.insuranceboard.org/covid-19-resources/>
- <https://www.insuranceboard.org/reopening-your-church-office/>

Southern New England Conference resource on Phasing Forward

- <https://www.sneucc.org/phasingforward>

Southwest Conference and COVID-19

- <http://www.swcucc.org/covid19-and-the-swc>

Articles

- <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/04/21/coronavirus-secondwave-cdcdirector/>
- <https://gabaptist.org/reopening-your-church-building/>
- <https://gabaptist.egnyte.com/dl/42FRJsEWEf/>
- <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robertpearl/2020/04/21/3-coronavirus-facts/#3c5755124721>
- <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/coronavirus-may-spread-faster-than-who-estimate>
- <https://kenbraddy.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/48-questions-to-ask-prior-to-reopening-your-church-3.pdf>



Desert Heritage Church Phased Plan for Resuming In-Person Gatherings Adapted from the Southwest Conference's Plan



- https://um-insight.net/in-the-church/umc-future/leaders-it-s-time-to-ask-critical-questions-for-post-covid-1/?fbclid=IwAR2LlnL3uVvLk5SAi47vAi_ogQuiL-yMyA4d5Nw-yQmSNFnuU4jyL8Rx2lw
- <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2020/april/relaunching-church-how-to-seize-this-moment-for-your-church.html>
- <https://www.wichurches.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/OSHA-10-Steps-to-Reduce-Coronavirus-Exposure-Poster.pdf>

Questions to consider when forming a safety plan for resuming in-person gatherings?

- ✓ Will you maintain an online streaming option once you are back together worshipping in physical space? How will that need to adjust when there is also in-person worship happening?
- ✓ What other online ministry practices need to remain in place after in-person gatherings resume? For how long?
- ✓ What programs and ministries are better online than they were in person? How will this inform your decisions?
- ✓ How many people can your worship space hold if you are worshipping in households sitting 6 feet apart? How will you limit the number of people admitted? Will you take reservations and how might that be managed?
- ✓ Will masks and gloves be provided to participants? Will they be required to bring their own? Who is responsible for monitoring compliance with requirements to participate in-person?
- ✓ How will you respond to people arriving to participate, not being prepared to comply with your safety plan (masks, gloves, etc.), and saying, "But I'm not sick?"
- ✓ Will you ask people to take their temperature before coming to a church gathering?
- ✓ When in earlier phases of relaunch, how will you cap attendance at events so there is room for members of the community to join you and so you don't go over guidelines?
- ✓ How will you indicate appropriate distancing parameters in pews? On the floors where people are likely to bottleneck, near doorways, in bathrooms, etc.?
- ✓ What kind of ministry activities are safe for infants, children, and teens when sanctuary worship resumes? How will you work with parents to ensure their children are safe and healthy when they come to church gatherings?
- ✓ How will you manage congregational singing in worship? What is your plan for the choir? (singing poses significant health risks during in-person gatherings.)
- ✓ What is your plan for serving Communion?
- ✓ What is your plan for receiving member donations without passing an offering plate?
- ✓ What is your plan for resuming in-person funerals? Weddings? Confirmation? Baptisms?



Desert Heritage Church Phased Plan for Resuming In-Person Gatherings Adapted from the Southwest Conference's Plan



- ✓ How will you discourage the receiving line after church and/or congregating after worship services? What is your plan for people exiting the room while maintaining appropriate separation?
- ✓ How will you communicate the need to suspend coffee hour even though in-person worship has resumed? At what point could coffee hour resume?
- ✓ How can you encourage small group gatherings with the building of small group, discipleship systems, etc. in the earlier phases of relaunching—possibly even before we begin phased resumption of in-person gatherings? How might you continue these when in-person worship resumes?
- ✓ What is your plan for cleaning/sterilizing building spaces after they are used for in-person gatherings?
- ✓ How will you ensure sanitation and disinfection of equipment used during gatherings? equipment that won't be used during the pandemic in order to make disinfection easier?
 - Worship bulletin disposal,
 - Hymnals, songbooks, etc.
 - Areas where small groups gather during the week
 - Nurseries and/or playgrounds
 - Pews or chairs following worship
 - Doorknobs, bathrooms, other areas that people touch when in your building
- ✓ If someone who has been in your building contracts COVID-19, how will you do a more intensive cleaning prior to its next use?
- ✓ What adjustments need to be considered in your custodial/cleaning contracts?
- ✓ What special precautions and accommodations does your sexton/custodian need?
- ✓ How is your supply of and your supply chain for tissues, hand sanitizer, etc.?
- ✓ Will you post signs indicating symptoms of illness and remind them to go home if they are experiencing them?
- ✓ How will you communicate your safety plan and best practices to the congregation?
- ✓ How will you update your building use policies to reflect the new realities of COVID-19? Your rental agreements?
- ✓ If someone contracts COVID-19, how will you communicate with your congregation and members who may have come into contact with that individual while maintaining privacy and pastoral care?
- ✓ What is your plan for resuming office operations?
- ✓ What is the plan for resuming pastoral visits? How will that be communicated to the congregation?
- ✓ What church groups include people who are at higher risk for severe illness? What special precautions need to be taken when resuming in-person gatherings for these groups?



Desert Heritage Church Phased Plan for Resuming In-Person Gatherings Adapted from the Southwest Conference's Plan



- ✓ What is your plan for resuming in-person committee and governance meetings?
- ✓ How will you manage resumed programs and gatherings while higher risk volunteers, staff, or participants continue to shelter in place?
- ✓ Has your insurance company weighed in on benchmarks for reopening, and for operating any programs? Your Conference leader? How will these influence your decision?
- ✓ What additional resources do you need to formulate informed and workable plans for resuming in-person gatherings?
- ✓ What has the financial impact of the pandemic been on your congregation's budget?
- ✓ How will you reduce expenses if necessary? How will you decide when that is necessary?
- ✓ What is the plan if staff reductions are necessary? Who will make those decisions? How will they be communicated to employees? To the congregation? Under what conditions will furloughed staff members be recalled?
- ✓ What resources are available to tide the congregation over during an economic downturn? Reserves? Endowment? Conference funds? Lenders?
- ✓ What are we learning about ourselves? About our congregation? About our relationships with the wider Church?
- ✓ What will it take to lead our people on the journey through grief and loss rather than around it?
- ✓ What do we want to take into the future from the present crisis?
- ✓ God, given what we have been through, what is the difference you are calling us to make?
- ✓ What questions have you considered that are not included here yet? Who will share those with the Southwest Conference office so they can be shared with leaders of other congregations?