



THE NEWS FROM NORTHUMBERLAND

The Next Steps for our Churches

Greetings Northumberland Presbytery:

With the governor beginning the process of partially reopening the state, our congregations are discussing when they should return to public worship. Though most of our churches closed their physical doors only six weeks ago, it feels much longer, and I understand why our congregations are anxious to get back together.

In Pennsylvania, churches are legally able to reopen their physical spaces. Every session now needs to decide about the timeline and procedures that will be best for their particular congregation. Several are ready to open within the next couple of weeks while others feel it best to wait.

It is also vital to remember that reopening does not mean returning to how things were before mid-March. One of my pastor friends put it best when she said, "I have banished the word 'return' from my church vocabulary because we will not be returning to anything that looks like what it was before the pandemic. Today, we talk about what comes 'next'." These are sound words that I hope many of us will take to heart.

Whether we like it or not, want it or not, social restrictions will be with us for a while. We need to respect that reality. So, as we think about what comes next, here are some important thoughts:

- First and foremost, only the session of each church can decide when their church should reopen and the manner in which it will reopen. However, I would suggest sessions consult with their pastors and their congregations before they act.
 - Where is your congregation in all this? How do they feel? How is COVID-19 affecting your community? How is it affecting them, individually?

As we read in Ecclesiastes 3:1, "For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven." Is now the season to reopen? Our state and national leaders are repeatedly

warning us all: take it slow. We do not know what will happen when businesses, parks, and communities open up.

Though it is not up to me, if I were asked, I would say all churches should wait at least until June 1 to consider returning to worship. By then, we might know how the reopening is affecting our communities.

Please remember that congregations, like everyone else, will still be required to follow the safety procedures in place at the time they choose to open.

- Each church will need to know what those are at any given time.
 - Currently, they include proper social distancing, wearing masks, washing hands regularly. All those are difficult in a worship/fellowship setting.

So, as we prepare for that time, whenever it will be, we all should ask ourselves what our plans are and how will we ensure the safety of our congregation and community. Here are some questions and thoughts that might be helpful to consider. They come from a variety of sources including multiple Zoom conversations with many groups, Ken Braddy's "24 Questions Your Church Should Answer Before People Return," and our friends over at the Upper Susquehanna Synod of the ELCA.

Initial Questions

- How many people in your church and neighborhood are in the at-risk category?
- Some people will be anxious to make church just like it was – they will want to hug, pass the collection plate, etc. Others will not be ready to return to worship and will feel left-out. Still others will be somewhere in between. Many within those groups will have strong opinions about their stance. How will you address all their concerns?
- When the session votes, will it be by simple majority or will the moderator require a super-majority or a unanimous vote?
- What plans will you have in place if the pastor or a member of the congregation tests positive for COVID-19 after you begin gathering?
- How will you be intentional and gradual about adding activities according to your congregation's ability to maintain COVID-19 related precautions?
- Will you determine what the maximum number of people there should be in each room that will be utilized in your church building?
 - If so, how will that number be maintained?

Worship

- What plans will you have in place for gatherings up to 25 people? 50 people? 100 people?
- If masks are still required to be worn, what will you do if someone arrives without a mask?
 - Will you have masks on hand?

- Will you have sanitizer on hand and in multiple and strategic locations?
- How will you keep people (non-family groups) six feet apart?
 - Will you advise using every other pew and ask folks not to sit directly behind someone?
 - Will you rope off pews?
 - Will you offer multiple services, even in smaller congregations, to limit the number of people in one place?
- Will you keep doors open at all times, so no one needs touch a doorknob?
- Will you have proper air circulation?
- Will you be able to remove the need for people to touch something that someone else touched?
- Bulletins – will you use them?
 - If so, will place them on a table so no one is right in front of another person handing them something?
 - Could you email them in advance so some folks could print them out at home?
 - Could you use project the information to a screen instead?
- For the offering, will you have baskets available at the entrances and exits, so offering plates are not passed around?
 - Other options including mailing in contributions and using online offerings.
- Lord's Supper, Baptisms, Choir
 - Are these elements essential to your worship since they each increase the risk to those who gather?
 - If the session votes to include these elements, what precautions will be taken to minimize the risk?

 - Lord's Supper
 - Would you consider intinction only – nothing passed hand-by-hand.
 - How will you prepare the elements?
 - What size will the elements be?
 - How will they be placed so people aren't touching more than their own piece?
 - Will the cups be small, individualized?
 - Will the cups be disposable?
 - Who will be disposing them?
 - How will you manage the flow of people coming forward so there will be no bunching up?

 - Baptisms
 - Will the parent hold the child the entire time?
 - Could the pastor proclaim the trinity with the parent applying the water?

- Would the pastor be aware of where she or he is standing so they are not facing the parent(s) or the child?
 - Would the parents be willing to not have extended family join them around the font – limiting the contact?
 - Choir Ministry & Hymn Singing
 - Singing has proven to be an effective means of spreading the virus. There is a greater risk of projecting particulate while singing.
 - How will the risk be minimized?
 - No communal hymn singing for the first month?
 - Having a soloist sing the hymns and anthem?
 - Have an instrumentalist play?
 - As time goes by, introduce quartets and small ensembles that allow for social distancing.
 - For practicing, will you require that singers observe the six-foot rule and not sing in the direction of anyone else?
- What will you do for a “meet and greet” time?
- What will you do about the Passing of the Peace?
 - Considering these actions involve the exact interaction our medical community and government strongly dissuades, will you take steps to mitigate the risk?
 - Options include making the passing of the peace a liturgical act between the pastor and the congregation, eliminating the need to face one’s neighbor. Please, no hand shaking or hugging.
- Will the door greeters greet?
 - Safest option – they won’t be there
 - Next safest option – they
 - do not shake hands or hug
 - stay six feet from those they are greeting
 - try not to be overly gregarious – it creates the same risk as singing.
- For those who do not feel comfortable going out in public, will you provide alternatives to in-person worship?
 - If you currently have a model for worship in place during this pandemic, will you continue it?
 - If so, will the session help the pastor balance the job duties to allow sufficient time to provide two modes of worship?

Christian Education

- What are the risks associated with offering children’s church?

- Can you assure families that children will be protected while in a separate and typically smaller space?
- Will you offer childcare?
 - If so, how will you be able to follow safety guidelines?
- Could this be an opportunity to encourage multi-generational worship?
- What is your plan for Sunday School Curriculum?
 - Could you use online resources
 - Could you offer virtual education classes?
- Could you offer virtual VBS?

Fellowship Activities

Are you going to provide a coffee hour or fellowship time before or after worship?

- Safest answer – no
- If the answer is yes, then, could this be offered outside?
- What precautions will need to be taken whether inside or outside? Suggestions:
 - Coffee stations should be serviced by a volunteer with mask and gloves.
 - No self-serve stations for drinks or food.
 - Only individually wrapped food items should be used and distributed by a volunteer in a mask and gloves (sorry, no home-cooked anything).
 - There will need to be a plan for moving people through without bunching up
 - Tables & chairs should be spaced out to maintain social distancing – including limiting the number of chairs at a table
 - Special attention should be taken to sanitize and sterilize any area where people gather to eat and drink, both before and after an event.

Pastoral Care

- If you have in-person worship, some folks will not feel ready to come back, but will feel like they aren't supporting the church if they don't attend, putting them in an uncomfortable situation. What will you say to them? What options will they have?
- How will you reach people who do not wish to go out in public?
- How will you provide care for homebound and those in nursing homes that will not put them at greater risk?
- How will you deal with the rise of COVID-19 related cases of addictions and domestic violence?

Property & Administration

- What supplies do you need to have available for proper government-recommended/required hygiene?
 - Soap and hot water, disposable hand towels, sanitizer, disinfectant, etc.?
- What is your plan for disinfecting gathering spaces, restrooms, door handles, and anything and everything that people will touch?

- Will you have volunteer cleaning teams that clean before and after an event?
- Will you have roaming individuals who will clean what they see people use and touch (roaming discretely of course)
- How will restroom use be managed in order to minimize potential contact between individuals?
 - Most of our church bathrooms are quite small.
- What limits will you put on the number of people who can gather in your worship or fellowship space? Classrooms? Hallways?
 - How will you keep people six feet apart?
- Will you have separate doors for entry and exit and how will you help people not bunch up?
- Do you have an outdoor space in which to gather for activities?
 - What will such gatherings look like?
- What plans will you have in place as other groups request to use or resume using the building?
 - What plans will you have to keep those spaces clean throughout the week?

Should you invest in new digital equipment right now?

- If you developed an on-line presence, will you maintain it?
- Please note that the presbytery is putting together a tech grant for our churches.

If certain key volunteers do not feel comfortable returning to church yet, what plans will be made to replace them or reduce activities?

What new volunteer positions might emerge from all this? Ideas:

- Technical coordinators
- Deacons for online community
- Virtual education coordinators

Attached to this newsletter:

- “Returning to Church”
 - A document produced by the Wisconsin Council of Churches. Our denomination is recommending we look at it. It breaks down the opening of churches into phases.
- Ken Braddy’s “24 Questions Your Church Should Answer Before People Return.”
- Carey Nieuwhof’s article, “Avoid the Big Mistake, Stepping Back into the Past When You Step Back into Your Building.”
 - Carey is a pastor and writer focusing on leadership, change, and personal growth. The article encourages us not to abandon some of the ways we’ve adapted during the pandemic.

Thank you for looking at the special newsletter and please let me know if you have any questions about anything listed here.

Grace and Peace to you all,

Steve

Rev. Steve Cureton
Executive Presbyter
Northumberland Presbytery
570-204-2540
presbynorthep@gmail.com
www.northumberlandpresbytery.org