



Bishop's COVID-19 notice #9, Nov. 10, 2020

November 10, 2020

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The circumstances and risks from COVID-19 vary from place to place and from time to time. Therefore, the COVID-19 Crisis Management Team has adopted a new Phase 2.1 addendum to *Reimagining Life Together*, which opens the possibility of gatherings of up to 25 for worship and other activities. In places where data shows a low risk of spreading the virus a church or other ministry can present a ministry plan for approval to move to Phase 2.1 as long as the risk remains low.

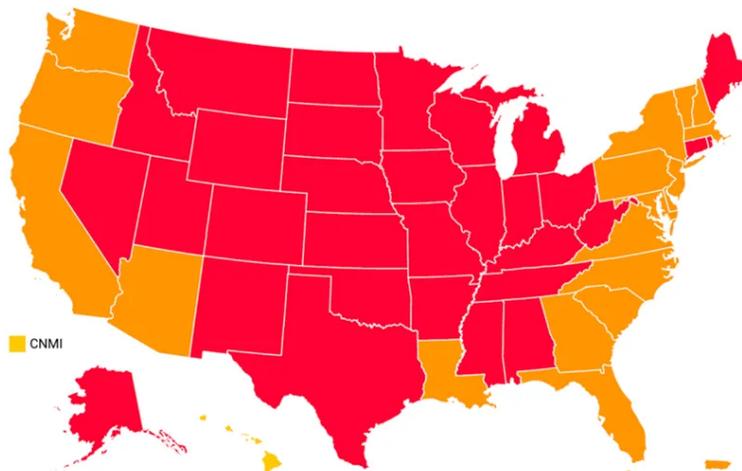
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RISK LEVELS

- Active or imminent outbreak
- At risk of outbreak
- Slow disease growth
- On track to contain COVID



Cases of COVID-19 are on the rise across America in what one public health doctor called a “raging firestorm.” The highest number of daily new cases of COVID-19 since March occurred yesterday in Alaska. Idaho, Oregon and Washington and have been rising since September 8. This is not the time to let down our guard against this highly contagious, deadly disease.

So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith. Galatians 6: 9-10 NRSV

Although states have not always held religious organizations to the same gathering restrictions as other organizations, I have held United Methodists in the Greater Northwest Area to strict limits. For most of our churches, this is not the time to loosen these restrictions. Most churches have moved successfully to holding worship and other activities online, either live streamed, or pre-produced. If I were a pastor of a local church today, I would not move toward more and larger in-person gatherings at this time and I do not encourage our churches to do so.

Some, however, are located in areas without reliable internet, some do not have the technical ability, and some members and leaders simply will not and do not use online church options.

This pandemic, and our knowledge about it, have grown and changed over time:

- Since February, science has learned and taught us about how the virus spreads and how to limit its spread by wearing masks, keeping 6 feet apart, limiting the length of time of gatherings, and washing hands and using hand sanitizer.
- Just today we heard hope that an effective vaccination may be available by the end of the year.
- The incidence and danger of spreading the virus is very low in some places and extremely high in others, and
- The longer we live with restrictions on our freedom of movement and gathering, the higher the risk of mental, psychological and spiritual suffering.

Churches seek to balance the harm caused by continued spread of the virus and the harm done by continuing to restrict in-person gatherings for worship, prayer, fellowship and study. How do we weigh the risk of COVID-19 spread and deaths against the risk of loneliness, depression, despair, substance abuse, domestic violence and suicide as the months wear on, the days grow short and dark and the weather pushes us indoors? No gatherings are risk-free, but as we strive to balance competing harms, some gatherings with strict safety practices under certain conditions may be prudent.

Phase 2.1 Addendum to *Reimagining Life Together* guidelines allows a church or other ministry setting, with the consent of their pastor, to present a plan for holding in-person gatherings of up to 25 persons with physical distancing, and facemasks in use for approval

by their District Superintendent, in the case of local churches, or Director of Connectional Ministries in the case of other ministries. All church or ministry settings and all District Superintendents and Directors of Connectional Ministries will use data from www.CovidActNow.org to determine their county's risk level, based upon 5 risk indicators.

If a church or other ministry is located in a county where the risk is found to be in either the green or yellow zone, and if the designated supervisor approves the ministry's plan for Phase 2.1, then it will be allowed to gather up to 25 people for worship or other ministry activities, following the practices approved in the plan. If a church has moved to Phase 2.1, but the risk reported by COVIDActNow increases to levels orange or red, it will need to retreat to Phase 2 levels of activity.

Read the Phase 2.1 addendum – an option within phase 2

As we watch daily reports of a pandemic that is out of control, and consider loosening the restrictions on church gatherings, remember these thoughts from *Reimagining Life Together*:

As we reenter life together, we must allow for our dream or memory of community to fade to make room for love to emerge in new and different ways. The task we have is to reimagine church – and all we are and do – so that we can be what God dreams us to be. After all, church isn't a building; it isn't doors or a steeple. Church is the people in ministry and service. If we can't do this ministry in the ways we have in the past, we will find new ways to do it. We will find a way. Our imaginations can show us what is possible.

God will open a new way before us.

I am about to do a new thing;

now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness

and rivers in the desert. Isaiah 43: 19

May God guide our feet into the way of peace!



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