



Covenant's Re-Opening Process

May 18, 2020

Preamble

Six months ago, no one would have imagined that we would not be able to gather together for worship the last two months. Even when we first heard about the approaching pandemic, we were thinking weeks, not months. And while we've attempted to make the best accommodations possible during this "stay-at-home" time, we all long to be back together as soon as we can possibly be together again safely.

We also recognize re-opening corporate worship will not be as simple as unlocking the doors on Sunday and doing what we have always done on a typical Sunday. While some things will not (and should not) change, other things will (and must). The recommendations from medical, ecclesiastical, and government sources continue to pile up (cf. the end of this document). The Vision/Transition Team, along with a few staff members and Mike Vonk (chair of the Admin Team and Council), have spent the last three weeks working on a plan to re-open the church and beginning worship services together. Unfortunately, the plan doesn't offer a specific date; instead, it provides a series of steps to re-opening that are dependent on the best medical advice we can discern.

The advice here from an article written for The Gospel Coalition is our current reality for re-opening, "...Long before that happens [i.e., re-opening the church], *Elders (Councils) of local churches need to prepare their policy and communicate how it will be implemented...What mitigation policies will you be putting in place? ...we don't need to have all the answers, but our people should see that you've given the issue serious thought and consideration.*" - Joe Carter

The Council has given these recommendations due consideration, made appropriate changes, and is now sharing our consensus with you.

Please understand that this document is not set in stone but is considered to be a working document that assists in giving us direction into an unknown future; it is subject to change. Please understand that we are prioritizing mitigating and reducing the risks of harm and illness that come with the spread of the virus. This will involve considerable changes - at least initially.

We are most appreciative of your ongoing support and prayers.



Principles and Priorities (The “Why” of the Plan)

(Guidelines for re-opening Covenant Church following the Pandemic of 2020)

1. We will hold to our Mission and Vision: Together, we desire to grow God’s family by transforming ourselves and our neighbors to live and love like Jesus. We are “Captivated by God’s Grace, Compelled to Love.”
2. We will be mindful of and care for the most vulnerable - the elderly, those with pre-existing conditions (e.g. immunocompromised), frontline medical personnel, and their families. (cf. Matthew 25:40)
3. We will not be constrained by fear, but in faith, wisdom, and collaboration, we will seek to be proactive in our planning and preparation to minimize the possibility of anyone contracting the virus and any consequences from the virus. (cf. 2 Timothy 1:7)
4. We will, to the best of our ability, honor federal, state, and local health department guidelines, and denominational recommendations. (cf. Romans 13:1)
5. We will, in reopening the church building, remember that the church is more than gathering for Sunday worship services. In fact, we believe that some of the most essential ministries of being a church happen Monday through Saturday.
6. We will, in our planning, focus on what is best for the whole community (e.g., the more vulnerable and the least vulnerable; our members, regular attenders, and guests; those living near the church and those at a greater distance). (cf. Philippians 2:3-4 concept: *“In humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”*)
7. We will, as we re-open, give due diligence to providing and maintaining a safe environment, including developing necessary sanitation and safety practices and procedures.
8. We will, as we begin to open, continue to provide digital worship (e.g. live-streaming) and ministry opportunities for those who prefer to remain in the safety of their homes.
9. We will, as a community church, consider how our facility can best be used to serve our congregation and neighborhood, not only now, but in the future.
10. We will, in striving to be Christ to one another and the world, follow the Holy Spirit’s leading in coming “alongside” one another, staying connected, and promoting the community of Christ.
11. We will, as we pursue worshipping together again, continue to pray for one another - for health, wellness, and protection from the virus, for the staff and leadership of Covenant Church, for those on the “front” in this battle, and for our neighbors, nation, and world.



Step 1 for Covenant Church - “Stay Home, Stay Safe”

Our current position as of May 18, 2020

Worshiping at Home, Together

When

- While under a government “Stay at Home” order.
- While under stages 1,2, and 3 of [Michigan’s Safe Start Plan](#)

What

- The Church building will remain closed; only staff and personnel necessary for making worship services possible will be allowed in the building.
- The office may be “open” for calls, emails, texts.
- Worship opportunities will be provided digitally (a pre-recorded worship service will be made available each Sunday).
- Discipleship opportunities will be available digitally (e.g. daily devotionals, online Bible studies, and *Discipleship Journey* gatherings; etc.).
- Messages and worship litanies will be made available by mail to those not able to connect digitally.
- Pastoral care givers will connect regularly with people through emails, texts, personal phone calls, etc.
- Encourage people to give (tithe) digitally.

Step 2 for Covenant Church - Small Gatherings

Multiple Families and Individuals meeting together for Worship; “House Churches”

When

- When the stay at home order has been lifted.
- When we move to stage 4 (*Improving*) of Michigan’s Safe Start Plan.

What

- Step 1 items will continue during this phase.
- The church building will remain closed during this stage; only staff and those necessary for making worship services possible may be in the building.
- Since small gatherings are allowed in this stage, members will be encouraged to meet with a few other members and neighbors to worship (i.e., watch the provided service or, like a house church, lead their own worship) together. This might take place in a large porch, patio, backyard, driveway, etc.
- Small gatherings, since they involve multiple family units, should be limited (e.g. 8-12 persons) and observe recommended guidelines (e.g. safe distancing, use of facemasks, sanitizer/hand washing, etc.).
- Since gatherings would be largely localized, members would be encouraged to invite their neighbors (whether they attend Covenant Church or not).
- At this stage, those in the more vulnerable categories should continue to avoid non-family groups; they and others can continue worshipping in their own homes.
- Since we still aren’t able to “go” to church; members are encouraged to “be” the church to each other and their neighbors.



Step 3 for Covenant Church - Medium Gatherings

"Contained" Worship

When

- When we move to stage 5 (*Containing*) of Michigan's Safe Start Plan.

What

- Step 1 and 2 items will continue during this phase.
- The church building will be "open" on a limited basis during this stage; staff and necessary personnel may be in the building; others may drop by during posted hours.
- Some smaller in person meetings may resume (while keeping safe distancing and other required protocols).
- Worship services may be recorded/live streamed with some members in attendance. Participants will be determined by the gathering size allowed, by our ability to provide a safe and protected environment, and on a rotating basis. Most members will still be watching digitally. The Administrative team will determine the participant list.
- Those entering the building and participating in worship, a meeting, and/or in facilitating a ministry will be required to commit to the required protocols; these will be posted and may include keeping a safe distance, wearing a mask, having temperature checked; sitting in assigned seating; no hand shaking or hugging, leaving immediately following the end of their need to be present.
- Worship during this phase may look different. Current protocols are suggesting no congregational singing because of the highly contagious nature of this virus.
- During this phase, will there be no child care/nursery, Children in Worship, Sunday School, Discipleship Journey, or mid-week in-the-facility ministries.
- Since "larger" gatherings are allowed in this stage, members will be encouraged to meet with other members and neighbors to worship (i.e., watch the provided service or, like a house church, lead their own worship) together. This might take place in a large porch, patio, backyard, driveway, etc. Being together and singing would require masks and safe distancing. (Pastoral Elders and PCA's could be instrumental in encouraging these groups).
- With people attending worship in this phase, only one worship service will be held each Sunday to allow for a thorough cleaning and sanitizing.
- Develop and initiate a small group ministry to foster a sense of community, vision, and *being* the church.



Step 4 for Covenant - Large Gatherings

Resuming In-House Worship

When

- When we move to stage six (*Post-pandemic*) of Michigan's Safe Start Plan.

What

- The church building will be "open" Monday to Friday; staff will return to normal office hours; people may come and go into the building.
- Morning worship services will be open to all who feel safe in coming while adhering to current protocols.
- Worship services will continue to be live-streamed.
- Worship may look a bit different - e.g., altered practices for mutual greeting/handshaking, singing, re-opening offering boxes (no passing collection plates), different communion protocols, refreshments afterward.
- In person meetings may resume (while keeping safe distancing and other required protocols).
- Ministries, including children, youth, and adult, may be reinitiated while being cognizant of current protocols.
- Availability of an evening worship service will be evaluated in time.

Step 5 for Covenant - A "New" Normal

Resuming Active Ministry

When

- When a vaccine and/or antidote for covid19 is generally available (or)
- When we have been in the post-pandemic stage for an appropriate period of time.

What

- The church building will be "open" during ministry hours.
- Worship services will be open to all who feel safe in coming.
- Meetings, ministries, and gathering may require more space for people to feel safe. Worship practices during stage 4 will be reviewed for what continues, what returns to the pre-virus practice, and what must still change (e.g., reviewing: mutual greeting, handshaking, less singing; offering boxes (no passing collection plates), different communion protocols (e.g., no intinction), no refreshments afterward etc.).
- Pews/chairs may be re-spaced farther apart.
- Worship services will continue to be live-streamed.
- Rooms/classrooms may be enlarged/added/redone to provide greater spacing.



Notes and Disclaimers

1. It may be necessary to go back and forth between stages if outbreaks re-occur
2. As long as this virus remains in the community, and until there is a vaccine and/or antidote, there will be an inherent risk of gathering together. As the church proceeds with due caution to restart ministries and gatherings, participants are reminded to be aware of the risks to themselves and others of the spread of this disease. This is especially an issue for those over sixty, those with dealing with other medical issues, and those living in households with people more at risk, in the medical profession and first-responders. People are encouraged to use wise judgment.

Re-Opening Plan Team Members

Jamie Ballast - Vision/Transition Team
Beth Jammal - Vision/Transition Team
Rev. Jeff Bulthuis - Vision/Transition Team
Mark Jansen - Vision/Transition Team
Mike Vonk - Council President
Rev. Doug Kamstra - Specialized Transition Minister
Rev. Henry Schenkel - Pastor of Youth Discipleship & Outreach
Carol Christians - Ministries Director
Sarah Cupery - Worship & Music Director
Rick Theule - Administrator

Source List & Additional Resources

[Kent County Health Department COVID Data](#) – Kent County Health Department
[Reopening Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfecting Public Spaces, Workplaces, Businesses, Schools, And Homes](#)—Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
[What Relaunching the Church Might Look Like Over the Next 3-12 Months](#)—Christianity Today
[Coming Back Together After Coronavirus](#)—CRCNA's *Church Juice*
[Community and Faith-Based Organizations](#)—Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
[Basic Guide for Returning to Your Church Building After COVID-19](#)—Georgia Baptist Mission Board
[48 Questions to Ask Before Reopening Your Church](#)—Ken Braddy, LifeWay Christian Resources
[Children's Ministry During COVID-19](#)—CRCNA's Faith Formation Ministries
[Sustainability in Worship](#)—CRCNA's *Church Juice*
[Guidelines for West Michigan Places of Worship as the COVID-19 Pandemic Continues](#)—CRCNA
[The Risks—Know Them—Avoid Them](#) by Dr. Erin Bromage
[How Long Does the Coronavirus Live on Surfaces?](#) – WebMD
[MI Safe Start Plan](#) – State of Michigan
[COVID-Safe Church Guidelines](#) – Premier Productions