

UNIVERSITY LUTHERAN CHURCH MINISTRY DURING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK



Resetting our Expectations

Though in the beginning many of us had mental images of all returning at once to our churches in celebration, we are now recognizing that returning to church will have to happen in phases.

What future we will find ourselves in depends not only on the behavior of the virus, but on the actions of people – as individuals, churches, communities, and governments. The way forward will not be a matter of following a timetable, but of faithfully discerning the signs of the times, and responding accordingly. It has always been that way for the church. From the Lutheran Book of Worship: “You have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown....”

For at least the next year, we anticipate our lives to be shaped by the timeline set by COVID-19. We face difficult choices between conflicting needs and imperatives. We must both build and sustain a healthy church while protecting human health and lives. If we reopen our buildings and resume gatherings prematurely, we may unfairly force on our more vulnerable members the choice between keeping themselves and others safe and participating in congregational life like everyone else. At the same time, we are dedicated to building a flourishing community that lives out our church’s vision and mission.

This document is a framework to guide University Lutheran Church in making healthy and pastoral decisions, not a fixed set of guidelines that will account for every circumstance. We may move back and forth between phases if additional waves of infections emerge. The advice of public health officials may change as more becomes known about COVID-19. The phases of this plan are modeled after the Michigan Safe Start Plan which can be found here for reference:

https://www.michigan.gov/documents/whitmer/MI_SAFE_START_PLAN_689875_7.pdf.

We pray for a spirit of discernment, for wisdom, and patience. We pray for researchers and medical professionals; for the planners; for the ill and recovering; for those grieving and struggling with the weightiness of these times. We pray for the watchers and wonderers, and all those who wait upon the Lord.

Below are recommendations of how to phase re-opening our building and gathering in person.

A Model for Returning to Gather Together

The Michigan Safe Start Plan

The criteria for determining when to move between phases is built on the Michigan Safe Start Plan which considers three key areas:

- A. Is the epidemic growing, flattening, or declining?
- B. Does our health system have the capacity to address current needs? Can it cope with a potential surge of new cases?

C. Are our testing and tracing efforts sufficient to monitor the epidemic and control its spread?

The phases are:

1. **Uncontrolled growth:** Increasing number of new cases every day, likely to overwhelm the health system. Only critical infrastructure remains open.
2. **Persistent spread:** Continue to see high case levels with concern about health system capacity. Only critical infrastructure remains open, with lower-risk recreational activities allowed.
3. **Flattening:** Epidemic is no longer increasing and health system capacity is sufficient for current needs. Specified lower-risk businesses can reopen given adherence to strict safety measures.
4. **Improving:** Epidemic clearly decreasing and health system capacity is strong with robust testing and contact tracing. Additional businesses can reopen given adherence to strict safety measures.
5. **Containing:** Epidemic levels are extremely low and outbreaks can be quickly contained. Health system capacity is strong with robust testing and tracing. Most businesses can reopen given adherence to strict safety measures.
6. **Post-pandemic:** Community spread is not expected to return (e.g., because of a vaccine) and the economy is fully reopened.

We will follow the Safe Start Plan for the Lansing Region.

Current Reality- Stay Safe, Stay Home

This is our current operational context and corresponds to the Uncontrolled Growth and Persistent Spread phases (phases 1 and 2) of the Michigan Safe Start Plan. In these phases analysis shows epidemic growth rates slowing, hospital and treatment capacity built, alternative care facilities established, and infrastructure for crisis response and data systems to monitor progression are in place.

- Online worship services only recorded from home.
- Connect all members to a small group. As conditions shift, these small groups can provide spiritual and emotional support to one another and offer a setting for mission.
- Bible studies, small groups, Council, etc. meet online.
- Service ministries are using safety protocols and only addressing essential needs.
- Minimal, drop-in staffing sufficient for essential operations (deposits, mail processing, etc).

ULC Phase One- Safest at Home

ULC Phase One begins during the Flattening phase (phase 3) of the Michigan Safe Start Plan. In this phase cases and deaths decline for an extended period, vulnerable populations are effectively monitored, there is sufficient health system capacity in place, and improved testing, contact tracing and containment capacity.

- Continue holding online worship services only and consider recording in the sanctuary, while maintaining social distance.
- Life rituals (weddings, funerals) should be kept to less than 10 in attendance or postponed until a later date after consultation with Pastors.
- Bible studies and small groups continue to meet online.

- Office functions as limited as possible to ensure essential operations. Those in the office should be wearing masks; make sure that surfaces, including the phone, are regularly sanitized.
- Church councils, ministry teams and leadership teams continue meeting online.
- High-risk individuals (people 65 and older and those with underlying conditions), whether staff or volunteers, should continue to shelter in place.

ULC Phase Two- Safer at Home

ULC Phase Two aligns with the Improving phase (phase 4) of the Michigan Safe Start Plan. The shift from Phase One to Phase Two is based on a re-evaluation of the situation using the original criteria. Cases and deaths decline more sharply, percent positivity decreasing, healthcare system capacity continues to strengthen, and robust testing, contact tracing and containment protocols in place. It may be several weeks of improving conditions before this shift. This will require careful observance of physical/social distancing recommendations on an ongoing basis.

Worship:

- Continue holding online worship services and consider recording in the sanctuary, while maintaining social distance.
- Wear cloth face masks while at church, as is recommended in public spaces.
- Life rituals (weddings, funerals) should be kept to less than 20 in attendance or postponed until a later date after consultation with Pastors.

Small Groups and Faith Formation:

- Offer opportunities for Bible studies and small groups to meet in person or online. Consider meeting outdoors. Maintain online options for people who do not feel comfortable being in public.
- No in-person Vacation Bible School or in person music camp.
- Consider allowing congregational building users back in if they can observe gathering limits (less than 10) and distancing protocols.

Church Business

- Continue to work from home with opening the office for limited functions.
- Attend to cleaning and sanitizing the office. Pay attention to high-touch surfaces and cleaning hands.
- Church leadership and ministry teams of less than 10 can consider meeting in person while wearing masks and maintaining social distancing or continue meeting online.
- Consider allowing external building users/renters to resume operations, with a plan to address cleaning needs and agreement to observe gathering and distancing protocols.

General Building

- Post signs indicating symptoms and urging people to stay home/seek medical attention if they have symptoms.
- Maintain a good stock of tissue, soap, hand sanitizer, and disposable paper towels for drying hands.

- Clean the building regularly and between user groups, paying extra attention to high touch surfaces.
- If we become aware of someone in the church or a building user infected with COVID-19, put our communication plan into action and cooperate fully with contact tracers.
- High-risk individuals (people age 65 and older and those with underlying conditions), whether staff, volunteers, or program participants, should continue to shelter in place.

ULC Phase Three- Stay Safe

ULC Phase Three corresponds to the Containing phase (phase 5) of the Michigan Safe Start Plan. Cases and deaths at low absolute rates per capita, health system capacity is very strong, and robust testing, contact tracing and containment protocols in place. It may be several more weeks of improving conditions before this shift. Progress will not necessarily be linear.

Worship:

- In-person worship may resume while following distancing protocols. Consider limiting number in sanctuary to 50 (20% of sanctuary capacity) and have participants sign in. If two services, consider separating by at least six hours. Consult local authorities for guidance on size limits and timeframes.
- Continue to share worship online as there will be many who are at high risk and cannot join or may not feel safe to return even if precautions are in place.
- Wear cloth face masks while at church, as is recommended in public spaces.
- Watch for public health recommendations on Communion as we get to this phase and consult our Bishop.
- Watch for public health recommendations on group singing as we arrive at this phase. The Council will monitor recommendations from the CDC and Michigan's public health officials and offer updates.
- Use no-touch alternatives for passing the peace, collecting offering, and liturgical resources.
- Consider removing hymnals and Bibles. Use a projector screen instead of bulletins.
- Distancing: Have people spread out in sanctuary space with one family unit per pew; keep empty pews between families. Explore meeting outdoors.
- No fellowship/coffee hour. Encourage people to leave the building rather than mingling.
- Life rituals (weddings, funerals, confirmations) could take place in a more traditional way, with careful attention to guest lists so as to keep under 50 in attendance, and physical distancing plans.

General Building

- Post signs indicating symptoms and urging people to stay home/seek medical attention if they have symptoms.
- Maintain a good stock of tissue, soap, hand sanitizer, and disposable paper towels for drying hands.
- Clean the building regularly and between user groups, paying extra attention to high touch surfaces.
- If we become aware of someone in the church or a building user infected with COVID-19, put our communication plan into action and cooperate fully with contact tracers.

Other

- Regular office functions may resume while maintaining social distancing and wearing masks.
- Continue to attend to cleaning and sanitizing the office. Pay attention to high-touch surfaces and cleaning hands after dealing with the offering.

- Bible studies and small groups can start to meet in person. We recommend maintaining some online options for high-risk individuals and those who do not feel comfortable being in public.
- Groups, teams, and committees could meet in person.

ULC Phase Four

ULC Phase Four corresponds to the post-pandemic stage (phase 6) of the Michigan Safe Start Plan. Community Spread is not expected to return and there is sufficient community immunity and availability of treatment.

- Offer in-person and remote/online options.
- Physical distancing requirements are relaxed. Avoid crowding in the sanctuary to the extent possible.
- Consider going back to two services without time restrictions.

Questions to Consider

We must work through these questions before re-launch. ULC Ministry teams, members with specialized skills, and/or ad hoc groups will be assigned to address them in coordination with Council.

- How will online streaming and in person worship need to adjust to be able to maintain both?
Worship Planning
- When in earlier phases of relaunch, how will we cap attendance at events so there is room for members of the community to join and not go over guidelines? **Welcome**
- How can we encourage small group gatherings with the building of small group discipleship systems, etc., in the earlier phases of relaunching? How might we continue these when in-person worship resumes? **Evangelism**
- How will we ensure sanitation and disinfection regarding communal spaces? **Facilities**
 - Worship bulletin disposal, prayer books, 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
- How will we update our building use agreements to reflect the new realities of COVID-19? **Ask a member with legal background to review**
- If someone contracts COVID-19, how will we communicate with our congregation and members who may have come into contact with that individual while maintaining privacy and pastoral care? **Ad hoc group consisting of an attorney, health professional, Pastor, council member, welcome team member, security team member, and facilities team member**
- If someone who has been in our building contracts COVID-19, how will we do a more intensive cleaning prior to its next use? How will janitorial staff plan for and have standardized protocols? What will that cost? **Facilities/Council member**
- How will we communicate our safety plan and best practices to the congregation?
Office/Communications Team

This document was developed by ULC Church Council based on a model from the Wisconsin Council of Churches and following the Michigan Safe Start Plan.