

Reopening Churches Webinar Questions

Eastern PA Conference, The United Methodist Church

Please note that due to time constraints we were unable to answer all the questions on the EPA Conference reopening churches webinar. This document outlines our best recommendations and answers to the questions posed. Our conference leadership is working to produce a second webinar in the coming weeks, as we continue to monitor the PA Department of Health and CDC guidelines. We give thanks for the faithfulness of our EPA Conference churches in these days.

Q-1 What are your recommendations for allowing outside groups to use our building regularly? Specifically, Boy Scout troops and Alcoholics Anonymous, etc.? AA and other 12-step recovery groups use churches for meetings. How do we ask them to ask their attendees to sign liability waivers when it is an anonymous program? How can we be welcoming to these groups as we protect ourselves?

A-1 You can permit outside groups to meet if they can abide by the guidelines appropriate with the current phase, whether yellow or green. Each church should decide for itself whether or not it will require participants of outside groups to sign a liability waiver. Certainly, this could create a chilling effect on participation in Alcoholics Anonymous and similar programs that are supposed to be anonymous. In cases such as 12-step programs, it may be sufficient to require social distancing and cleaning, along with indemnification and adding the host church to the group's insurance policy.

In consultation with their leadership, you should also consider how notification would be made to 12-step programs.

Q-2 Is there a recommendation about what kind of masks (homemade, prefabricated, disposable) should be supplied to those who come without masks?

A-2 From a liability avoidance perspective, having commercially manufactured masks from a reputable vendor would be preferable. However, given the short supply of such commercially prepared masks, homemade is a reasonable substitution. However, individuals utilizing such masks should know that they are homemade and not professionally manufactured. In no event should masks be "recycled." If the masks are disposable, they should be disposed of after use. If masks are homemade and re-useable, the individual using the mask should take them home. In no circumstances should a local church try to wash and reuse masks.

Q-3 If a church reopens and follows yellow phase protocols because the church is in a county in which the county government has declared the county to be in yellow, but Governor Wolf still labels it as a "red" county, will this action have any impact on the church's liability insurance coverage?

Has our insurance company made any statements about dropping any church's policy if it goes with the Lancaster County/Lebanon County request to reduce to yellow before Governor says so? Gov. Wolf used that possibility as a means to induce compliance.

A-3 It is unlikely that insurance coverage would be dropped. However, if a claim was made due to a church employee, volunteer or attendee contracting COVID-19 at a local church that reopened while the state still considered the county to be “in red,” the insurance carrier could deny coverage.

We will reach out to the insurance committee and insurance provider to get their take on this question.

Q-4 Is there a document that we have or can draw up to give to another, non-UMC church that is renting our sanctuary that can protect us against lawsuits if someone in their congregation is infected with COVID-19?

A-4 Yes, Matt Morley, our conference Chancellor, is providing a lease addendum that can be used in this situation. Keep in mind, however, that liability cannot be avoided entirely. A non-UMC congregation that is sharing space with a UMC congregation should be asked to sign a lease addendum agreeing to take certain precautions (for example, require attendees to wear masks, clean the used space after services, etc.), and to add the UMC congregation to their insurance policy as an additional insured, while also indemnifying the UMC congregation in the event that there is a claim.

Q-5 CDC Guidelines state that in the event that a person diagnosed with COVID-19 is determined to have been in a building, the building should be closed until the property is adequately cleaned and disinfected. What constitutes adequate cleaning? Fogging a room to disinfect it can be prohibitively expensive.

A-5 The CDC has a guide to cleaning and disinfecting your building or facility if someone is sick. It is available online at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>.

Q-6 What about the state's caveat that allows people who have prohibitive health conditions to forgo wearing a mask. With HiPPA laws, how can we handle that? Can we ask for confirmation of their condition?

Q-6 Technically, yes, you can ask for verification or ask them to leave. They do not need to provide confirmation, but you can refuse entry to the building or ask them to leave if they do not. However, church leadership should consider whether they believe it is likely that people would abuse the honor system.

Q-7 If we use a scanner to take temperatures, do we need to notify people that this is taking place? Should we post a notice that body temps are being scanned?

A-7 You should provide a notice. Frankly, it is not clear whether Pennsylvania law actually has an answer to this question. Most body temperature scanners require you to stand still in front of them for a 1-2 seconds, so there is no way to not tell people. If they are making body temp scanners that are inconspicuous, providing notice is a good idea, irrespective of whether it is legally mandated. Please note that many infected persons may be asymptomatic; and so, temperature checks are not fail-safe. All other precautions should remain in place.

Q-8 You mentioned the trustees should vote on a resolution about procedures for reopening, etc. Could our conference chancellor recommend a comprehensive motion for the trustees to make? Why is it important that the trustees pass a Resolution?

A-8 Yes. Our chancellor will provide a sample resolution; however, this resolution should not be treated as comprehensive. Church leadership needs to develop a plan that accommodates the needs of the local congregation, the facilities available, and other unique factors. This plan should be approved by the trustees. It is important for the trustees to approve the plan—especially any restrictions on entry—because the trustees normally are the directors of the corporation which owns the property. If there’s ever a dispute as to who has the authority to require rules of entry on church property, the law would generally look to the rules established by the trustees. In churches with an alternate leadership structure, where the authority traditionally associated with the trustees is formally delegated to another body or individual, that body or individual’s determination may be sufficient.

Q-9 Are we required to alert members or volunteers of exposures to COVID-19 that have happened in the church?

A-9 No, but you should. If church members, attendees, volunteers, or employees have been exposed to COVID-19, it is a moral imperative that they are notified so that they may, in consultation with their doctor, take appropriate action. The identity of the individual with the COVID-19 diagnosis should be protected.

While it is important to address this in a cool-headed and deliberative manner to avoid creating unnecessary concern or panic, you should err on the side of disclosure. Failing to do so could be viewed as a profound breach of trust.

Indirect exposure notification is a lot more difficult. For example, consider if Jon is diagnosed with Coronavirus on June 5, but he had contact with Sam on June 1, and Sam attends church on June 7. Under CDC guidance, Sam should self-isolate. However, since Sam attended services on June 7, should the congregation be notified? These contact-tracing determinations are incredibly fact-driven and church leadership will need to make a judgment call on a case-by-case basis.

Q-10 The Red Cross is requiring a building sign-in for all persons entering buildings. Is it OK for us to do the same?

A-10 Pennsylvania treats church property as private property. Church leadership (specifically the trustees, who are normally the board of directors of the corporation) may put conditions on entry to the building and attending church events. Normally, these conditions should be used sparingly, but the current public health crisis justifies reasonable restrictions.

Q-11 What are the potential ramifications if we were to hold a short parking lot communion service with each person receiving pre-packaged elements (wafer and juice in one cup) as they enter the parking lot from masked people (while also masked). Any issues with doing this in Red versus Yellow Phase? Can we have parking lot church services where people stay in their cars at least 6 feet or more away and also do drive-through communion services?

A-11 Parking lot services can be conducted as long as participants remain in their cars at all times. Participants should not interact physically with clergy, staff or participants in other vehicles. This includes, but is not limited to, collecting donations by basket or plate. Our recommendation is to avoid passing any items into cars. We recommend that members bring the elements in their own cars to the service. Please also follow state/CDC guidelines in all services.

Q-12 So, to be clear, we are free to continue to meet electronically exclusively even through the yellow and perhaps into the green phases?

A-12 Yes. Church leaders may determine when the congregation returns to onsite worship in accordance with CDC and PA Health Department Guidelines.

Q-13 Are there different sub-phases to the green phase? If so how will we know how to move through this last phase?

A-13 Currently, Governor Wolf has not given different sub-phases to green, although CDC and PA Department of Health guidelines will still need to be followed throughout the green phase. Please continue to monitor the PA Department of Health & the CDC website, along with updates from the EPA Conference.

Q-14 Is there any role for checking temperatures or encouraging attendees to check them at home immediately before attending once we reopen?

A-14 Churches can do temperature checks for all staff/members/visitors in the building, if they desire. Your leadership will need to discern if temp checks should be part of a regular routine for guests in the building. Some health departments across the country have made this a routine procedure for businesses. Please note that many persons infected present as asymptomatic, and temperature checks are not fail-safe. All other precautions should remain in place. Please continue to monitor the PA Department of Health/CDC website, and our conference will do its best to keep churches informed as these guidelines are updated. We would recommend church staff and members continue to monitor their health and that signs be posted in the church indicating symptoms and urging people to stay home and seek medical attention if they have symptoms.

Q-15 In the yellow phase, what is the suggestion on having the praise band be in the church to livestream the service, as long as people are 6 feet apart? What is your opinion about a praise band playing during the yellow stage (with under 10 people) and using social distancing (6 feet apart) if they are the only people in the building, Is this an idea that we can implement? What if all people are wearing masks as they sing?

A-15 If the praise band is working with a leadership team to prepare a service, we recommend more spacing between participants. As stated in our reopening guidelines for the yellow phase, singing is among the riskier behaviors when it comes to spreading droplets and aerosols that can carry the virus a significant distance and remain suspended in the air. A cloth mask is unlikely to be enough to protect you or your neighbor. We recommend against singing in the sanctuary when the congregation is gathered. If a small praise band (duet or trio) is part of a worship service in the yellow phase, there would need to be significant social distancing in order to protect those gathered there.

Q-16 I see that we will need to sanitize our worship space between services. Do we need to sanitize other areas similarly between shifts? For example, community volunteers sort food for our pantry mission observing all CDC guidelines. We have three 90-minute shifts per day. Does the space used for sorting need to be sanitized between shifts? Or are we covered by cleaning daily at the end of the day? Should we have these volunteers sign a liability waiver?

A-16 We recommend cleaning between shifts and following CDC/PA Department of Health guidelines for sanitation. Church leadership may require volunteers to sign liability waivers. We recommend liability waivers for all outside groups using the church. Matt Morley, our conference chancellor, will be providing a template for church use.

Q-17 We offer Sunday School and a nursery during worship. How can you have 4-8 children socially distanced?

A-17 We recommend family worship during the yellow phase, with families sitting together. Children should not come forward for children's lesson time, but a children's sermon could be given where children remain with their parents to hear the message. If nursery or Sunday School programs begin, all CDC/Department of Health Guidelines must be followed.

A-18 Is coffee hour permitted in the yellow phase?

A-18 We recommend against offering a fellowship/coffee hour. Please also note the reopening guidelines related to social distancing; passing of the peace restrictions; offertory guidelines, etc. on the EPA Conference website's Coronavirus Response webpage.