

Building and Worship protocols for Lutheran Church of the Redeemer Updated October 22, 2020

As of today, Lutheran Church of the Redeemer is operating under Phase 2 Protocols until further notice.

Background

Since the early church, Christians have continued to gather, assured of the promise of Jesus that "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). We have gathered in small house churches and soaring cathedrals; we have met by trees on savannahs and in brush arbors in camp meetings; we have met secretly in underground gatherings and openly in rallies attracting thousands.

Until the time we couldn't meet safely.

Since the beginning of this pandemic, our church leadership has carefully made decisions with two priorities in mind:

- The Church never closes as the mission of Jesus Christ never stops.
- The health and safety of our community and the world around us are of the highest importance.

And so we have met the challenge of continuing the mission of Jesus Christ without gathering in person by meeting online, streaming our worship, and investing in other ways to connect, particularly through our Vineyard ministry.

Despite the challenges of the times we live in, because of our staff's creativity, the dedication of our leaders, and the faithfulness of our people, indeed, Lutheran Church of the Redeemer never closed. On average, since Fall Kickoff, each week, we reach:

- 948 worshipers (According to ELCA guidelines for counting online worship attendance)
- 47 Sunday School students and teachers
- 35 Confirmation Students and Leaders
- 13 High School Youth
- 95 Adult Faith formation participants plus 100 in our Small Groups

We have also served over 35,000 meals through the Lutheran Community Food Ministry, have met our financial pledges to our Core Spiritual Partners and Local Outreach partners, and have re-opened the Midtown Lutheran Preschool with 17 students attending.

Now we face another challenge. As the pressure to "re-open" grows, how will we resume worship and other gatherings while the pandemic is still with us? In May of 2020, the Church Council, following our bishop and synod's advice, formed a COVID

Task Force to advise and make recommendations on how we can meet this new challenge. Since that time, the following persons have served faithfully and tirelessly in this endeavor: the Rev. Mark H. Larson, the Rev. Jonathan Trapp, Bob Boyd, Seth Brown, Kate Elkins, Eli Flourney, Michelle Spady, Jeanne Merritt, Paul Rosser, Carol Bell, and Doug Dumont.

Approach

Following the advice from the White House Corona Taskforce, the CDC, and our synod, our COVID taskforce advised, and the council approved a **phased approach** to re-opening based on **scientific benchmarks** indicating the relative safety of gathering under specific distancing guidelines.

The benchmarks involve both state and local public health conditions and the readiness of states and local communities to provide testing, appropriate health care, and follow-up with people who may have been exposed to someone diagnosed with COVID-19. These benchmarks include:

- The trajectory in the number of reported symptoms confirmed cases, and/or positive tests for COVID 19 over two consecutive weeks
- Local levels of hospitalizations
- Local levels of testing and resources for contact tracing

The COVID taskforce has been using two sources to track these benchmarks:

- <https://www.statnews.com>
- <https://www.covidexitstrategy.org>

While the recent announcement of possible vaccines with remarkable effectiveness in dealing with COVID-19 is the most encouraging news to date, the scientific benchmarks do not change. We will be encouraging everyone who is able to get the vaccine when it is available so that the numbers of cases and level of hospitalizations in our community will decrease, allowing a phased reopening.

Phased Approach

Following our synod's recommendation, we have implemented a phased strategy to gather together again safely. Until there is a cure or vaccine to this virus, we are attempting to determine safe ways to continue ministry remotely or in-person as the situation dictates.

Moving to the next phase (or back to a previous phase) will be based on the best medical information available, recommended by our Redeemer COVID taskforce, and approved by the council.

The ultimate goals of all these protocols:

- Preserve and protect the health of our entire community, both internal and external, especially the most vulnerable
- Follow the best advice of the medical and scientific community
- Obey the requirements and directives of our legislators
- Model good and responsible behavior
- Ensure the future vitality of our mission and ministry

Guidelines that apply throughout all Phases

We will communicate and model practices that have scientifically shown to reduce the risk of spreading the COVID 19 virus:

- A good practice would be for individuals to assume they are infectious and that others are infectious as well, regardless of whether they exhibit symptoms.
- Avoid "close contact" as defined by the CDC with those outside your home.
- Currently, that definition is multiple exposures (within 6 feet), adding up to over 15 minutes within 24 hours.
- Wear a cloth face covering (mask) at all times when not at home.
- Wash your hands with soap and water or use hand sanitizer (containing at least 60% alcohol for ethanol-based or 70% alcohol for isopropanol-based), especially after touching used items or surfaces.
- Avoid touching your face.
- Sneeze or cough into a tissue or inside of your elbow. Dispose of tissues after a single-use.
- Regularly disinfect frequently used items and surfaces using soap and water or [EPA-registered household disinfectants](#) (including bleach and cleaners containing at least 70% alcohol).
- Higher-risk individuals, including those over the age of 65, smokers, and those with serious underlying health conditions, such as high blood pressure, chronic lung disease, diabetes, obesity, kidney disease, asthma, and those whose immune system is compromised, are encouraged to follow the guidance specifically offered for them.

People Who Feel Sick or Have Been Told to Isolate/Quarantine Should Stay Home

- Stay home if you feel sick or have been told to isolate/quarantine due to potential exposure.
- If you are concerned about your health, contact and follow the advice of your medical provider.
- Notify your church leaders or congregational COVID-19 Taskforce if you have been in the building and have tested positive for COVID-19. Taskforce and leaders will respect individuals' privacy, but this will allow them to help local health departments who may be strapped for resources with contact tracing efforts.

- As always, our pastoral care team stands ready to support anyone facing any medical challenge.

The Phases

Shelter in Place: Emergency shutdown to stop uncontrolled spread of the disease

- All employees to work remotely if possible
- Stay at home unless necessary
- No gatherings outside the home of any size
- Essential services and minimal business operations are permitted
- Remote worship planning and leading.
- All weddings, baptisms, and funerals will be postponed.
- Excepted:
 - Providing food for the disadvantaged is exempt from this order so that the Food Ministry will continue, following the protocols for physical distancing in place
 - Minimum and essential business operations are allowed, which means we need to close the office except for mail and banking functions, including payroll, phone forwarding, and ensuring all employees have the equipment and materials necessary to work from home.
 - The building is closed to all members, leaders, and staff unless involved in the operations noted above; no exceptions.

Phase One: Maximal Physical Distancing to stop the upward spread of disease

- All vulnerable individuals continue to shelter in place
- No gatherings over five people, exercising strict physical distancing and mask-wearing, avoiding close contact.
- All employees are encouraged to telework whenever possible.
- Worship will be Livestreamed from the sanctuary with only worship leaders allowed in the building following the under five people group guideline
- All weddings, baptisms, and funerals will be postponed.
- Excepted:
 - Providing food for the disadvantaged is exempt from this order, so the Food Ministry will continue, following the protocols for physical distancing in place
 - Preschool will re-open in support of working families following strict physical distancing requirements
 - Minimum and essential business operations are allowed, which means we need to close the office except for mail and banking functions, including payroll, phone forwarding, and ensuring all employees have the equipment and materials necessary to work from home.

Phase Two: Intent is for a slow transition of key staff members and prioritizing important small gatherings (i.e., funerals, weddings) and support services essential to supporting our economy and mental health.

- All vulnerable individuals continue to shelter in place
- No gatherings over ten people, exercising strict physical distancing and mask-wearing, avoiding close contact.
- All employees are encouraged to telework whenever possible.
- Worship will be Livestreamed from the sanctuary with only worship leaders allowed in the building following the under ten people group guideline
- Funerals, Weddings, Baptisms, etc., are allowed following the under ten people group guideline
- Outdoor and homebound communion visitation will resume following the under ten people group guideline
- Other small gatherings can take place on the church property as recommended by the COVID taskforce and approved by the council with the following criteria:
 - They serve the mission of the church
 - They are "location-specific" and cannot be reasonably accomplished online
 - Can be accomplished following the under ten people group guideline
 - Ideally can be accomplished outside
- Examples of activities that have been approved: Adult handbell practice, Outdoor gardening groups, Drive-through Monster Mash, Organ lessons, Election Day Polling
- Groups who are interested in resuming activities are asked to complete the [Redeemer COVID Taskforce Event Request](#) at least three weeks in advance of their desired date. The taskforce will review each application and make a recommendation to the church council.

Phase Three: Intent is for a slow and gradual transition to in-person worship and other church activities.

- Continue to minimize physical contact, minimize shared items, maintain physical distancing as possible.
- Maximizing the use of outdoor space should be prioritized to minimize spread
- Office staff can resume more in-person full schedule; continue allowing remote/home exceptions for those concerned with return prior to a vaccine.
- Gatherings are limited to under 50 at any given time, including in-person worship, faith formation gatherings, outreach activities, weddings, baptisms. A reservation system will be implemented to ensure safe distancing. Singing will still be limited to designated worship leaders.
- Opportunities to participate virtually will continue.
- Funerals/memorials can also have larger gatherings (<50) unless it is for someone who was confirmed or suspected to have COVID-19. Due to the high risk of close family/friends being exposed, these gatherings should remain with <10 people.

- Pastoral care can return to more typical visitation schedules but maintaining special precautions
- Cloth face coverings should be worn by all >2 years of age.

Phase Four: Gradual Return to full programming while remaining sensitive to vulnerable populations

- Continue to minimize physical contact, minimize shared items, maintain physical distancing as possible.
- In-person, worship will resume with a limit of 100 people, then gradually increasing
- Opportunities to participate virtually in all activities will continue
- Cloth face coverings should be worn by all >2 years of age, except in outside/indoor settings during exertion/high risk of dehydration/overheating.

Conclusion

The Strategic Plan that we rolled out in January cast a vision that through the ministry of Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, all the world would see Jesus. Since that time, the COVID-19 pandemic has radically changed our lives and our world. However, it has not changed our call to witness to the love, grace, and justice of our Lord.

Our methods may have changed, but our mission has not. We give thanks to our pastors, staff, leaders, and people for the daily work you accomplish in living your faith, extending forgiveness and grace to those around you, and witnessing to our ultimate hope in the abiding presence and love of our God.