

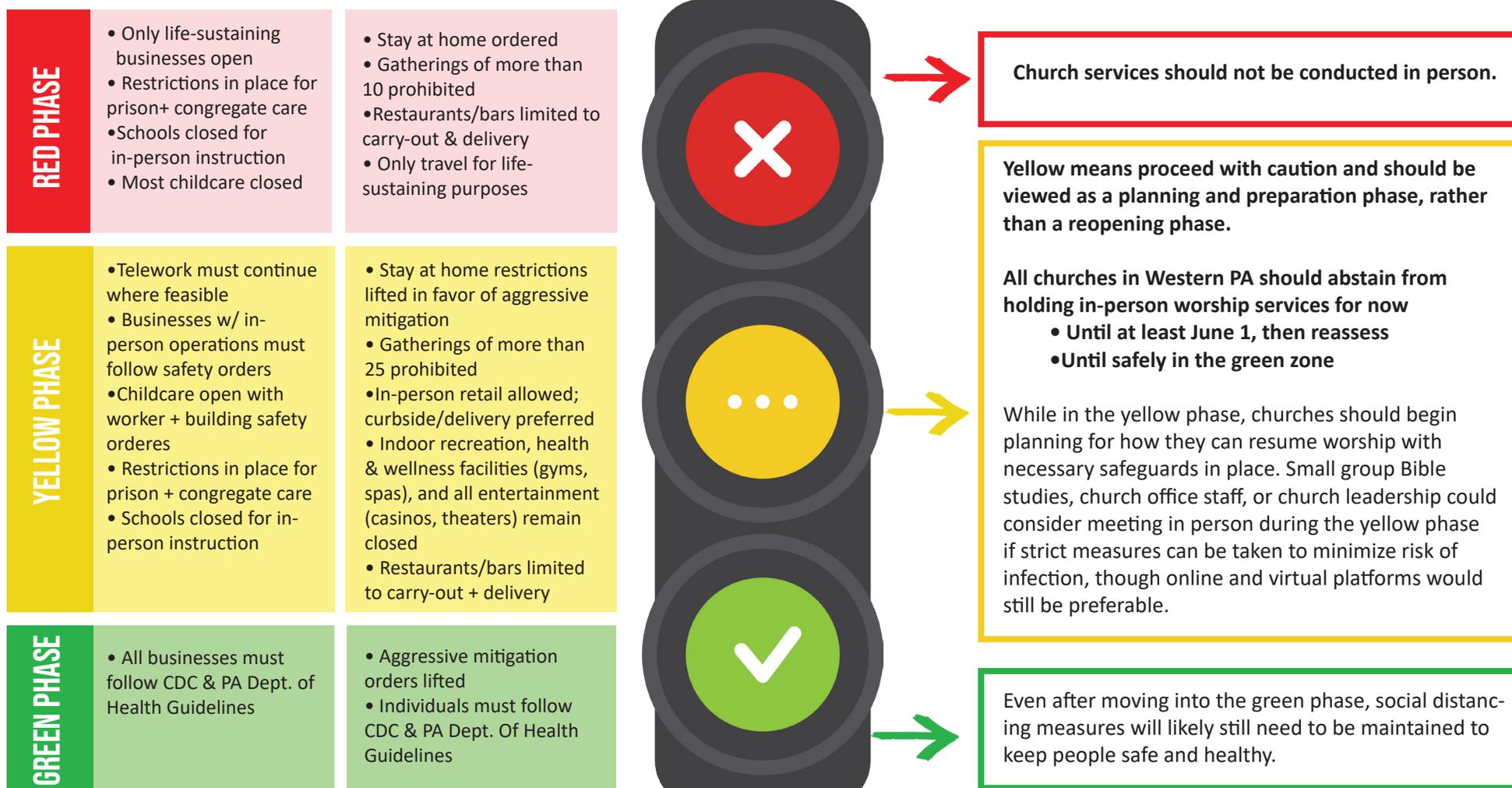
CHURCH REOPENING GUIDELINES

WESTERN PA CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

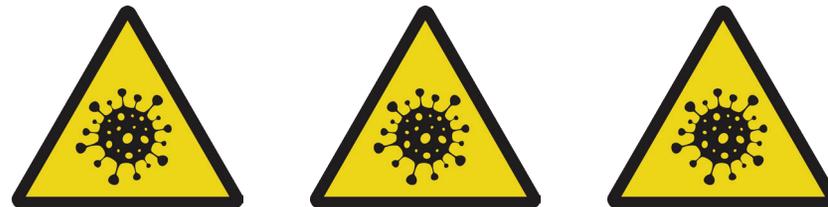


Governor Wolf has released a plan to reopen Pennsylvania and to start lifting stay-at-home orders beginning May 8, 2020. This will occur in three phases (red, yellow, and green) and certain precautions must be taken in each stage. Regions of the state may move from the red phase to the yellow phase if averaging less than 50 COVID-19 cases per 100,000 residents over a 14-day period.

Areas of our Conference will move into the yellow phase at different times, but for all it should be viewed as a time for planning and preparation to return to in-person worship. The prohibition on gatherings of more than 25 will remain in place through the reopening process UNTIL there is robust testing, community-wide surveillance, contact tracing, or other means to mitigate the spread of the virus. Here's what it will look like for our churches as areas move to different phases of the plan.



CAUTION ADVISED DURING YELLOW PHASE



There are multiple medical reasons to remain cautious:

- Widespread testing for COVID-19 is still not readily available in PA or in the United States
- Public health resources remain limited for contact tracing
- Only ~1% of US population has been tested to-date as of May 1, which means we do not know the true prevalence of COVID infection across the country and in our communities
- Asymptomatic individuals carrying the COVID-19 virus are a significant source of infection transmission

Strict restrictions under yellow phase mean it is not yet safe to gather for worship in person:

- Gatherings of 25 or more are still prohibited
- Schools in PA remain closed for the remaining academic year
- Restaurants are open for take-out/delivery only
- Entertainment venues, such as theaters and casinos remain closed

The church has moral obligation to protect the health and safety of all people, particularly the most vulnerable.

- There is currently immense pressure to reopen the economy, and while many in our country are suffering from loss of income or health insurance, churches should not rush back too hastily and put peoples' lives at risk.
- Reopening should be guided by current scientific research and advice from public health and medical experts.

It would be very difficult to maintain social distancing/minimize risk of infection that would be required, even in small groups:

- Highest risk individuals should continue sheltering in place (those age 60 and older and those with chronic medical conditions)
- Masks are required (What if someone shows up with out a mask? Will extras be available or would said individual be turned away?)
- Ensuring no more than 25 people present
- Seating/pews must be assigned to maintain at least 6 feet between congregants
- No handshakes or hugs
- Forego communion and passing offering plates
- No singing due to risk of producing droplet/aerosolized particles
- Commonly touched surfaces must be disinfected (Are EPA approved cleaning products that kill the virus readily available? Who will be responsible for cleaning?)
- Bibles and hymnals should be removed from sanctuary
- Bulletins should not be printed or distributed
- Difficulty of maintaining social distancing in confined areas, such as bathrooms and hallways
- Church leaders would need to track those in attendance if someone were to become sick or exposed
- Childcare/nursery should not be offered. Difficult for young children to abide by social distancing guidelines.

Note: These recommendations may change with new guidance from the Governor and public health officials.

PLANNING GUIDE FOR EVENTUAL CHURCH OPENING

DON'T MAKE DECISIONS IN ISOLATION. Form a “re-entry” team that includes the pastor, staff and key lay leadership in the church. If possible, include a medical professional, and representatives from the Trustees and Hospitality team (greeters, etc.). Be aware of local government and health guidelines for your community.

DO NOT ABANDON GOOD PRACTICES THAT KEEP PEOPLE HEALTHY!

Follow public health and guidelines as you return to your church building.

- Maintain 6 feet of social distancing, not just inside the building, but from the moment people leave their cars.
 - Encourage people to park with space between cars (every other space if marked)
- Have no physical contact between people (hugging, shaking hands, etc.)
- Wear face masks while in the worship space. Ask people to bring masks with them, but have a supply available for those who do not have one.
- Remind people to use hand sanitizer each time after touching or using anything in the worship space. Remind them not to touch their face after touching any surface. Provide hand sanitizer for those who do not have it or install touchless hand sanitizers dispensens at entrances/exits.

USE POSITIVE, ENCOURAGING LANGUAGE TO COMMUNICATE HOSPITALITY WHILE MAINTAINING HEALTH AND SAFETY STANDARDS.

Remember that people may still be anxious and fearful. Communicate needed information in three ways:

- 1) Verbal instruction
- 2) Digital communication (prior and during worship)
- 3) Posted signage in key places throughout the church building

CONSIDER HOW SPACE CAN BE USED DIFFERENTLY.

- Meet outside when you are able.
- Schedule small groups in large spaces
- Consider Drive-In worship settings using low-frequency FM transmitters.
 - Coordinate with local law enforcement or officials.
 - Utilize volunteers or signage to direct parking. Park cars in every other parking space (if marked)
 - Make sure everyone, including volunteers, staff, and clergy, follow social distancing guidelines at all times.
 - No one should leave vehicles for any reason.
 - No bathroom facilities should be available.
 - No playground usage.
 - Do not hand out bulletins. If needed, email the bulletin to people prior to the service so they have the option of printing them at home.
 - Do not permit anyone to exchange anything while at the service.

DON'T STOP VIRTUAL MINISTRY! Some people may not be comfortable with coming back to in-person worship for health concerns or fear of exposure to the coronavirus. Many churches have gained new followers through virtual worship: If these services are ended before healthy relationships are developed, they may fall away. Churches may need to return to virtual ministry if there is a resurgence of the virus. Continuing virtual ministry allows an easy transition back to this platform.

PREPARE THE WORSHIP SPACE AND THE CONGREGATION

- Clean all surfaces before worship/gathering.
 - Make sure that cleaning products are effective against the coronavirus. Alcohol based surface cleaners are considered adequate.
 - Items like microphones and keyboards may be difficult to clean. Check manufacturer's instructions for appropriate cleaning.
 - Have a plan in place to clean all surfaces between services. This may require a change in scheduled worship times.
- Post signs with seating instructions at the entrance to the worship space.
 - Use every other or every third pew. If possible, rope off pews to maintain appropriate distance between worshipers.
 - Allow families to sit together but maintain distance from others
- Provide a no-contact method of receiving the offering.
 - Place a bin or box at the entrances/exits for people to leave offering
 - Remind counters to wash hands immediately following the handling of money.
- Do not offer nursery as it would create a high risk situation. Plan for families to worship together.
- Do not have the choir sing at in-person worship; it's difficult and risky to do with social distancing standards.
- Remove Bibles, hymnals and other materials from the pew racks to eliminate surfaces where germs can be passed.
 - Encourage people to bring their own Bibles to worship.
 - Avoid use of printed bulletins.
 - If projection is available, use it for the order of worship (prayers, hymns,etc.).
 - If projection is not available, consider emailing or mailing the order of worship to people in advance to print at home.
 - Microphones should not be shared by participants.
- Practice extreme caution if planning to offer Baptism or Holy Communion. If it can't be done following public health guidelines, it is best to delay until restrictions are lifted.
- Develop a method to track worship attendance. This is especially important in case someone gets sick and contact tracing must be done.
- Consider limiting restroom usage to one person at a time in the space. Post signs to notify people of this practice. Make adjustments in the space to keep health guidelines in place.

As the PA plan unfolds, different parts of the Conference may be on different timelines under the red, yellow and green state plan. Everyone must adhere to current state and federal guidelines for their region. As you consider having gatherings in your building, think seriously about the safety and well-being of your people. While government guidelines may allow churches to open, it may or may not be the best decision for your church. Although many yearn to be together in worship again, it is Christ-like to consider the health and safety of others over personal desires to get back to normal.

Please visit our website at wpaumc.org for more information.

