



GUIDELINES FOR RETURNING TO OUR SANCTUARIES

- **Follow the most restrictive limitation.** Context is everything. If your county has limitations on public gatherings, you should follow that guidance even though the state's guidelines may be less restrictive. Churches should follow the [federal](#) and [state](#) guidelines related to phase one of returning. This includes but is not limited to:
 - **VULNERABLE INDIVIDUALS** should continue to shelter in place. Members of households with vulnerable residents should be aware that they could carry the virus back home. For a list of those considered vulnerable to the novel coronavirus, visit: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-at-higher-risk.html>.
 - **SOCIAL DISTANCING** (6 ft. rule, no handshaking, regular washing of hands, consider wearing masks that cover noses and mouths) should be practiced in public settings.
 - **PUBLIC WORSHIP** should be restricted to the Missouri state guidelines limiting public gatherings based on facility size:
 - For smaller locations (less than 10,000 square feet), they must maintain 25 percent or less of the authorized occupancy;
 - For larger locations (10,000 square feet or greater), they must maintain 10 percent or less of the authorized occupancy.
 - **SMALL GROUPS** (including Sunday School) should continue to meet digitally unless you can guarantee that social distancing guidelines can occur.
 - **NURSERY AND CHILDREN'S MINISTRIES** should wait to start up. Children do not have the ability to self-regulate. We caution our churches to move slowly with regard to in-person children's activities.
- **Churches should follow public gatherings guidelines.** Do not expect to hear "church" in your county's guidelines. United Methodist churches, with our focus on the community and social wellbeing, should be guided by social distancing and public gathering limitations. If your county says that occupancy limitations should be less than 10 people or 10% or 25% of your seating capacity, you should follow that guideline. See the limitation as standing in solidarity with your community, i.e., if the local VFW post cannot hold their annual picnic, perhaps the church should not either.
- **Lead your people on what *must* change as your church returns to the sanctuary.** Regardless of your local guidelines, as we seek to do no harm, some things – even things we love – are going to have to change when we return to our sanctuaries. For good questions on what must change, consider the following resources:
 - Suggestions from the [Wisconsin Council of Churches](#)
 - [24 Questions Your Church Should Answer Before People Return](#)
- **Rethink some of the "common" in-person worship activities** that may put people at risk. Practices such as handshaking, shared communion cups and paper bulletins, passing of the offering plate should be avoided.



- **Adjust your expectations and guide your people in managing their own expectations.** If there is one thing we have learned through this experience it is that we are not in control. Health experts have warned us that we may be in a long period of social distancing and restrictions until a vaccine may be readily available. We must be guided by data and at the time of this writing, Missouri's new cases and deaths are still increasing. The governor said on Sunday, April 26 that Missourians need to prepare for a slow and steady road to recovery.
- **Start thinking about having courageous conversations with your lay leaders and staff.** Texas Methodist Foundation's Rev. John Thornburg calls this Level Two courage and creativity. Not everyone is able to start having these conversations right now. If you, as the pastor, are not able to, identify a strong lay leader who is future-focused who might be able to guide your local leadership in thinking through some of the questions the author lays out in <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/blog/when-we-return>.