

WE ARE ONE: BWC STRONG



As we begin to re-emerge from the grief, caution, and anxiety after more than a year of physical distancing, it is important to pause for a moment of prayer and reflection. We thank God for the people of the Baltimore-Washington Conference and for the leaders of its churches, who have responded in unprecedented ways to ensure the body of Christ continued to be strong and vibrant throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

During this quadrennium we have been guided by the wisdom and teachings of Ephesians 4:1-16. We have drawn from these passages as we engaged in holy conferencing, developed our strategic foci, and ordered our lives together in mission and ministry. The overarching message inherent in these verses continues to ground our protocol and processes for gathering together as the beloved community. Ephesians reminds us that we are one as the body of Christ – and, within that oneness, there is yet diversity. The way that we are able to remain in the unity and bond of peace is that we privilege others above ourselves, and care for one another with acts of love. We also resist any immaturity that tears at the fabric of

our unity or succumbs to selfish motivations.

We bear with one another in love as we all strive towards the same end, which is being fully alive in Christ Jesus and robust in love.

“I encourage you to live as people worthy of the call you received from God. Conduct yourselves with all humility, gentleness, and patience. Accept each other with love, and make an effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit with the peace that ties you together...”

– Ephesians 4:1-3

As your episcopal servant leader, in consultation and conversation with the COVID-19 Task Force, I have stressed to you that we must privilege life over every other

consideration. During the early stages of the pandemic, we erred on the side of safety rather than expediency and worked to be nimble and flexible in all that we did, trusting in the best information available from medical experts and infectious disease personnel. Our personal desires were secondary as we sought to care for the most vulnerable among us. Those principles have served us well and will continue to guide us as we begin to re-open church buildings for worship, meetings and other in-person gatherings.

In this time of transition, the discernment of local church leaders is more important than ever. May we continue to hold one another in prayer as we move forward in hope, grace, and love – seeking to live as the people of God, making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Peace and Blessings,

Bishop LaTrelle Easterling and the BWC COVID-19 Task Force, May 2021

TRANSFORMED LIVES TRANSFORM LIVES

FORM A RE-ENTERING WELL TASK FORCE



The pastor will ensure that each congregation forms a “Re-Entering Well Task Force” to plan for a phased-in reopening of their building(s) for church gatherings. Ideally, in addition to the pastor, the team would include a health professional (if possible), and a representative from the church’s Trustees, Pastor/Staff-Parish Relations Committee, and hospitality team (greeters, etc.). Congregations without access to each of the recommended members shall form a task force reflective of their clergy and lay leadership. This team should review this document and create a plan for the church. Their work will be informed by the local health department.

Three Considerations to Determine How and When to Re-enter the Church Building for In-Person Gatherings

For the health and safety of persons who will attend gatherings, the task force must address the following questions:

- **WHAT?** Consider how your church is helping people get vaccinated. For those who aren’t vaccinated, consider the availability of required supplies, such as masks and hand sanitizer, and how you will adhere to all CDC and local health guidelines to mitigate risk.
- **WHO?** Consider the percentage of congregants who are vulnerable to the virus, the number of members and visitors that are vaccinated, and the degree of discipline to implement the decisions made.
- **WHERE?** Consider the size and configuration of your space(s) including parking lots, foyers, sanctuaries, bathrooms, classrooms, etc. and what that means in terms of meeting health guidelines.

WHAT?

Before congregations gather, each church must ensure an adequate and sustainable amount of required supplies to meet CDC guidelines. Church leaders should:

- Obtain adequate amounts of cleaning and sanitization products. Alcohol-based surface cleaners are adequate to kill this virus as long as they are 60% or higher in alcohol content.
- Obtain an adequate number of masks for anyone who does not arrive wearing their own. People refusing to wear a mask must be asked to leave and join the service virtually.
- Provide hand sanitizer for those who do not have it and/or install touchless hand sanitizer dispensers at entrances/exits.
- Address the fact that microphones, keyboards, handheld electronic devices, and other surfaces may be difficult to clean or disinfect because they could be damaged if they became wet. A cleanable cover/skin (e.g., keyboard skin) could be used on the item to allow for cleaning while protecting the item.
- Ensure that each microphone will be used by one person during a gathering; they may not be passed from person to person. Sanitize the microphones after each gathering.
- Create signage that assists in communicating core safety messages in a way that is hospitable and caring.



WHO?

It only takes one person to infect many others. Those who are vaccinated do not seem to be able to transmit the coronavirus and, if they are exposed, may be asymptomatic or exhibit less severe symptoms. Those who are unvaccinated are still at risk. Please refer to the “Choosing Safer Activities” resource as a guide. Some people who carry the coronavirus may be asymptomatic and not realize they have been infected. When your congregation resumes in-person worship:

- People who are unvaccinated must:
 - Maintain six-feet of physical distancing, not only once inside, but also from the time they leave their cars, enter the worship space, and exit the space to return to their vehicles.
 - Have no physical contact (hugging, shaking hands, etc.).
 - Wear face masks when out in public -- including parking lots and buildings. Ask people to bring masks with them, but have a supply available for those who do not have one.
 - Be vigilant about hand and face hygiene at all times.
 - Sanitize hands each time anything in the building is touched or used.
- People vulnerable to the virus should stay at home with full access to virtual church activities.
- Leaders, identified and equipped by the task force, must take responsibility for enforcing necessary policies to create a safe space for people who come into our church buildings to worship.
- Develop a method to track attendance at worship and other gatherings. This is especially important in case someone becomes ill and contact tracing is required.
- The risk for transmitting the virus is high in nurseries and Sunday School. Plan for children to be in worship with their families at this time.
- The risk for droplet transmission is high for unvaccinated choirs and musicians playing brass and woodwind instruments. The current best advice is no choral or congregational singing at in-person worship. With singing and specific instruments, droplets can be projected farther than six feet and remain suspended in the air longer. Vaccinated persons may sing, play woodwind instruments or preach for worship without masks. Unless all participants are vaccinated or frequently share life together (like a family) unmasked, we advise against congregational singing.
- The risk for unvaccinated greeters, ushers, and Communion stewards is high as most of their tasks handling items that multiple people touch and do not allow for appropriate physical distancing.

KEEP DOING VIRTUAL MINISTRY



Once local authorities deem it safe to gather, there are at least four reasons to continue virtual ministry:

1. Some people have joined you virtually and won't join you physically until they have formed deeper relationships with you and your congregation. Some may choose to remain virtually connected, and you won't want to lose their presence.
2. Some people are more vulnerable to coronavirus and are being asked to stay home until Phase 3.
3. Some people may not be comfortable returning to in-person worship due to fears about the risks involved.
4. If local/state authorities issue a new stay-at-home order or return to Phase 1, congregations will be required to return to virtual ministry.

WHERE?

The most reliable way to prevent infection from surfaces is to regularly wash hands or use hand sanitizer. Cleaning and disinfecting surfaces can also reduce the risk of infection. However, as a matter of due caution and respect for parishioners, churches should do an extensive cleaning of all door knobs and push-handles, railings, arm rests, pew or chair backs, kitchens and dishware, bathrooms, and any “touch” surfaces. Before the congregation returns to your church building:

- Clean and sanitize your facility. This cleaning process should take place before and after all gatherings. This may require a change in scheduled worship times.
- The church campus must be prepared to ensure that people may adequately comply with physical distancing from the time they enter the property until they leave. You could choose to make exceptions based on vaccination status.
- Signage and ongoing education should offer clear directives regarding safety-focused behaviors that are expected when attendees are present in church buildings.
- Mark designated entrances, exits, and building traffic patterns, highlight the location of sanitizer stations, remind people to practice physical distancing, hand washing, and to avoid touching their faces.
 - Consider using every other or every third parking space for unvaccinated persons.
 - Consider using every other or every third pew for family seating. Rope off pews as necessary.
 - Consider exiting by rows instead of all at once, while maintaining the required six feet of physical distancing.
 - Consider limiting restrooms to one person at a time. Larger bathrooms could accommodate more than one person with forced spacing by “closing” every other urinal or stall.
 - Consider minimizing use of printed materials. Instead rely upon projecting Scripture and hospitality messaging or convey information verbally.

In posted signage, digital communication, and verbal instruction, use positive, encouraging language that reflects hospitality, while maintaining a commitment to loving our neighbor and doing no harm.

- Offerings should be collected in secure receptacles near entrances and exits. We advise continued encouragement of electronic offering. A safe method for counting the offering must be implemented including the use of disposable gloves.
- Taking Communion in worship is safe for those who have been vaccinated. These suggestions remain for those who are not vaccinated:
 - Purchase prepackaged Communion elements.
 - Place kits on seats or pews before people arrive. Have extra prepackaged Communion elements available so people may take one without touching others (e.g., each kit 1 foot apart): position the table in such a way that physical distancing is maintained.
 - Provide waste receptacles at the end of each inhabited pew so that the used Communion elements may be discarded immediately.
 - If you feel vulnerable and don't want to remove your facemask in order to prevent contamination, please take the blessed Communion elements home with you and partake there after thoroughly washing your hands and the elements container.
- Social/coffee hour is safe for vaccinated and is riskier for unvaccinated persons who need to maintain physical distancing, mask wearing, and hand sanitizing practices. Food should be served by servers wearing gloves and using utensils rather than offering open table buffets.
- Though you will be communicating to people that they should stay home if they feel sick or if someone at home is sick, identify a space that can be used to separate someone who becomes ill during a gathering until they can safely depart and return home. In the event of any medical emergency, call 911 and administer first aid following updated guidelines.

STAY INFORMED ABOUT LOCAL AND CDC GUIDELINES



There are three jurisdictions within the Baltimore-Washington Conference (D.C., Maryland, and West Virginia). Each has or is developing a localized plan with health agencies to interpret CDC guidelines based on local data, including county guidelines. Additionally, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has created valuable resources for Faith-Based organizations including “Planning, Preparedness and Response Resources” and “Reopening Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfecting Public Spaces.” All of this is available at: bwcumc.org/gov

We are compiling all the resources your congregation needs to be well informed and equipped to engage in ministry at this time. For local and CDC guidelines, FAQs and more, visit: bwcumc.org/re-entry

CDC Resources

- Toolkit for Community and Faith-Based Organizations
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/toolkits/community-faith-based.html>
which includes the following links:
 - [Considerations for Communities of Faith](#)
 - [Considerations for Events and Gatherings](#)
 - [Guidance for Reopening Buildings After Prolonged Shutdown or Reduced Operation](#)
 - [Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility](#)

Jurisdictional Resources

Maryland:

- Maryland Strong: Roadmap for Recovery:
https://governor.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/MD_Strong.pdf
- Data:
<https://coronavirus.maryland.gov/>

Washington, D.C.:

- Reopen D.C. under development:
<https://coronavirus.dc.gov/reopendc>
- Data:
<https://coronavirus.dc.gov/page/coronavirus-data>

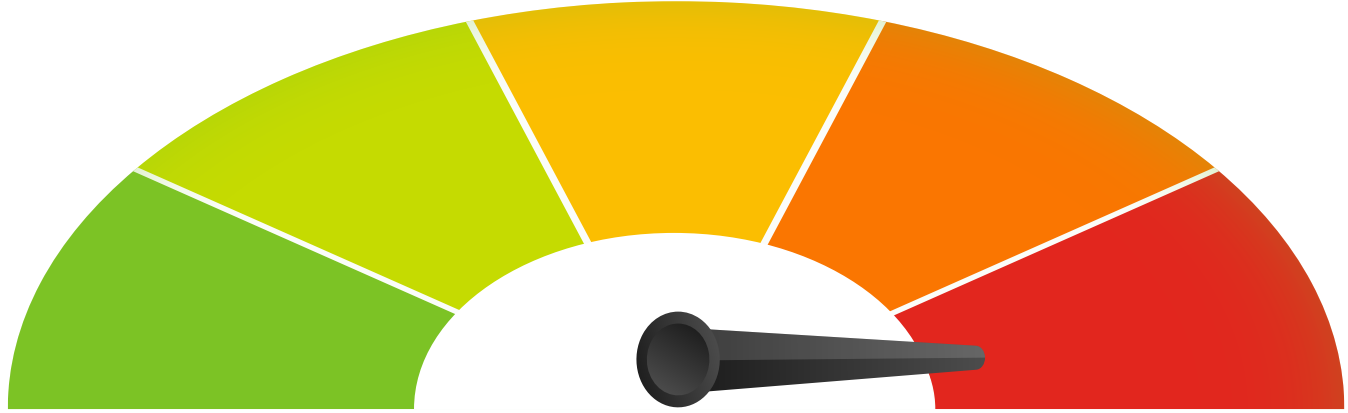
West Virginia:

- West Virginia Strong: The Comeback:
<https://governor.wv.gov/Pages/The-Comeback.aspx>
- Data:
<https://dhhr.wv.gov/COVID-19/Pages/default.aspx>

APPENDIX:

GUIDELINES FOR RE-ENTERING WELL: CONSIDERATIONS FOR RESUMING IN-PERSON GATHERINGS IN CHURCH BUILDINGS

The three phases of the Centers for Disease Control guidelines for governors and mayors are based on a foundation of data-driven risk management. Stay-at-home orders are designed to lower the risk of spreading COVID-19. As restrictions are lifted, risk increases. Each governmental agency is responsible for putting in place robust testing, contact tracing, a health care system with adequate capacity, and plans for monitoring specific data. While areas of our Conference may at times be in different phases of responding to the pandemic, here are examples of what it will look like for our churches in different phases.



RISK OF SPREADING COVID-19



LOW RISK PHASE 1

- Stay-at-Home or Safer-at-Home Orders.
- Very limited in-person gathering size based on local government guidelines.
- Essential travel only.



MEDIUM RISK PHASE 2

- Modification of Stay-at-Home or Safer-at-Home Orders.
- In-person gatherings limited (up to 50 people) observing six-feet of physical distancing in all directions.
- Business and facility openings will be phased-in per governmental directives and CDC guidelines, hospitals and nursing homes will be among the last to permit visitation.



HIGH RISK PHASE 3

- Lifting all Stay-at-Home Orders.
- In-person gathering size will increase per governmental directives and CDC guidelines.
- Visitation to nursing homes and hospitals per CDC guidelines and institutional directives.
- Increased activities beyond home for vulnerable persons per CDC guidelines.

GOVERNMENT

CONGREGATIONS

- BWC congregations continue meeting virtually for worship, meetings and study.
- BWC congregations designate a Team to plan ahead for disposable Communion sets, hand sanitizer (alcohol content of 60% or greater), disposable masks, approved cleaning solutions, etc. Many of these items are on back-order and may be difficult to find.

- BWC congregations continue to offer virtual worship services, meetings, and study for those who cannot safely rejoin gatherings.
- BWC congregations cautiously discern when to implement plans and provisions to safely reopen buildings for in-person gatherings of 50 or fewer people.
- Continue to strictly follow guidelines from our bishop, the CDC, and governmental directives.

- BWC congregations follow plans and provisions for re-opening Sunday School, nurseries and other programs that weren't safe during Phase 2.
- Continue with CDC recommended practices to maintain health and safety for all people.