

COVID-19 Response Stages

New Hope United Methodist Church

Our Rationale & Purpose

We anticipate that our lives will continue to be shaped by the presence of the disease COVID-19 for an unknown period of time, requiring us to continuously evaluate and re-evaluate how we worship, meet, and reach out to others as a church. We recognize the enormous benefit of in-person fellowship and worship together, and long for the day when we are able to gather without need for plans and restrictions. We also recognize the serious illness and long-term effects of COVID-19 infections, and seek to protect the health and well-being of our congregation and community above all. As we navigate this challenging season, we face difficult choices between conflicting needs and imperatives, and continue to prayerfully seek God's guidance for how we can most faithfully and carefully respond.

We offer these stages as a framework for decision-making, to be used in consultation with data available from local and national public health officials. Each stage includes lists of considerations for various gatherings and programs; the pastors, in consultation with the Church Council and with up-to-date guidance from public health officials, will decide which considerations need to be in place at any given time. We anticipate that we will not move in a linear fashion from one stage to another, and that there may be times when we need to move "backwards," adopting the practices of earlier stages.

General Practices & Procedures

Communication with Our Congregation. Full copies of this model will be readily available to all members of our congregation. Additionally, summary reports of this model will be shared and updated regularly. As the COVID-19 situation continues to evolve, we will provide regular updates about our congregation's response via our email list, church website, and Facebook page.

When we enter a new stage (either more or less restrictive), the rationale for that decision and its implications for the life of our congregation will be shared promptly. Clear signage will be developed and posted around our church building about current church procedures at each stage, including signs detailing symptoms of COVID-19 infection and basic safety precautions. Such information will also be shared through announcements at any in-person events.

Should an attendee at an in-person church event test positive for COVID-19, we will communicate that information to the congregation while seeking to protect the privacy of the individual, following the guidance of public health officials and/or contact tracers.

Compliance with Government & Public Health Officials. At all times, we will be in compliance with any guidelines or regulations established by local, state, or national governments and public health officials. We will comply with and support any requests for information from those officials related to a need for contact tracing in our congregation or community.

Compliance with The Baltimore-Washington Conference. At all times, we will be in compliance with any guidelines or regulations for congregations established by The Baltimore-Washington Conference and/or its resident bishop.

Supplies. The Pastors, Trustees, and Finance Team will coordinate the purchase of cleaning and other supplies needed to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. A 60-day supply of all items will be maintained. Needed items include:

- Face masks
- Automatic hand sanitizer dispensers
- Hand sanitizer
- Gloves (sizes medium and large)
- Sanitizing wipes for surfaces
- EPA-approved cleaning products

Entering the Building. The level of access to the building shifts with each stage in this model. Throughout each stage, sign-in and sign-out sheets will be posted at each door. All persons entering the building for any reason will be asked to sign and out, including indicating which parts of the building they accessed.

Commitment to Access & Inclusion. We recognize that individuals and their families have varying risk levels for serious illness from COVID-19, and that what is safe for one person may not be safe for all. We are committed to providing virtual video worship at all stages, until the COVID-19 pandemic is entirely behind us and all are able to safely attend in-person worship. Worship videos will be closed captioned to provide full access for the Deaf and hard-of-hearing. We encourage church meetings and small groups to choose the meeting option that allows for the highest level of attendance and participation from all members.

Stage One: Stay at Home

Stage One is for those times when the risk of spreading COVID-19 is great enough to outweigh the benefits of in-person fellowship and worship. If Frederick County or Maryland are under stay at home orders or advisories, we will remain in Stage One.

Worship Services. Chargewide video services and drive-in worship at Olive School Road. Considerations for drive-in worship include:

- Maintaining social distance of at least six feet between households (children will remain with their families for the duration)
- Face masks required for all attendees five years of age or older when social distance cannot be maintained, and encouraged for the duration
- Attendees may bring their own lawn chairs or blankets to sit outside of their vehicles
- A “closed contact” parking area will be provided for attendees who wish to remain in their vehicles for the duration of the service; no seating outside of vehicles will be permitted in this area
- An ASL interpreter will be available upon request, and there will be reserved parking for those needing the interpreter
- Abbreviated service length (30 minutes)
- Offerings placed in a basket near the entry/exit (not passed from person to person)
- Bulletins made available in advance via email, as well as provided in hard copy
- RSVPs or attendance recorded in case of a need for contact tracing
- When communion is offered, attendees encouraged to bring elements from home
- Inclement weather policy: the worship leadership team (including the pastor) will determine if the weather is not conducive for outdoor worship at least one hour prior to the service start time; any cancellation decision will be communicated via email, website, and Facebook

Church Meetings & Small Groups. Meeting virtually or choosing not to meet.

Staff & Lay Leadership. Working from home, and may enter building for essential operations only; lay leadership must receive permission from a pastor before entering the building. Essential operations include:

- Financial deposits
- Printing necessary documents
- Checking and processing mail
- Building maintenance walk-throughs
- Picking up materials to work from home

Children & Youth Ministries. Meeting virtually or choosing not to meet.

Cleaning. Suspended. Those entering the building asked to remove any trash they produce.

Community Groups. Not meeting in the building or on the property. Leadership may enter building for essential operations and must receive permission from a pastor before entering the building.

Stage Two: Safer at Home

Stage Two acknowledges that we continue to remain safer at home, while also recognizing that we benefit significantly from fellowship and worship together as a congregation. The pastors, in consultation with the Church Council and with up-to-date guidance from public health officials, will decide which considerations need to be in place. Those decisions may change throughout this phase, becoming either more or less restrictive as the most current guidance recommends. The lists of considerations here are not exhaustive; other considerations may arise and be added.

Worship Services. Chargewide video services and drive-in worship at Olive School Road. Considerations for drive-in worship remain the same as listed in Stage One.

Life rituals (baptisms, weddings, funerals) will be permitted in the sanctuary with a strict attendance limit of 10 (including officiant).

Church Meetings & Small Groups. Meeting virtually, outdoors, or choosing not to meet. Those groups choosing to meet outdoors must inform a pastor at least 24 hours in advance each time a meeting occurs. Considerations for meeting outdoors include:

- Maintaining social distance of at least six feet between households
- Face masks required for all attendees five years of age and older when social distance cannot be maintained, and encouraged for the duration
- Attendees accessed to bring their own lawn chairs or blankets; church folding chairs available for those who need them
- No restrooms or access to building available (those setting up may access the building)
- RSVPs or attendance recorded in case of a need for contact tracing

Staff & Lay Leadership. Encouraged to work from home, but may work from the building. If working from the building, staff and lay leadership are encouraged to coordinate schedules to minimize the number of people present at one time; lay leadership must receive permission from a pastor before entering the building for non-essential purposes.

Children & Youth Ministries. Meeting virtually, outdoors, or choosing not to meet. Outdoor meetings will follow the same safety considerations listed for church meetings and small groups above.

Cleaning. Intermittent; the custodian will resume cleaning the building once every two weeks. Those entering the building asked to remove any trash they produce.

Community Groups. Not meeting in the building or on the property. Leadership may work from the building, and should develop a regular schedule to be shared with the pastor.

Stage Three: Returning to our Church Home

Stage Three returns us to our church home, worshipping indoors in our sanctuary. This stage will require the most flexibility and adaptability among leaders and attendees, as there is still much we do not know about how the COVID-19 situation will evolve. The pastors, in consultation with the Church Council and with up-to-date guidance from public health officials, will decide which considerations need to be in place. Those decisions may change throughout this phase, becoming either more or less restrictive as the most current guidance recommends. The lists of considerations here are not exhaustive; other considerations may arise and be added.

Worship Services. Chargewide video services, drive-in worship at Olive School Road and/or services in our sanctuary. Considerations for indoor services include:

- Maintaining social distance of at least six feet between households (children will remain with their families for the duration)
- Pews marked to allow seating that maintains social distance
- Face masks required for all attendees five years of age or older
- Abbreviated service length (30 minutes)
- Removal of all shared items in pews (i.e. pew cushions, hymnals, bibles, pew cards)
- Doors open no more than 10 minutes prior to service time
- Hand sanitizer available at each entrance and in each pew
- No or limited singing (including soloists, choirs, and congregational singing)
- Attendees asked to leave promptly when the service is finished
- Offerings placed in a basket near the entry/exit (not passed from person to person)
- Bulletins made available in advance via email, as well as provided in hard copy
- RSVPs or attendance recorded in case of a need for contact tracing
- Attendees asked to limit restroom use as much as possible
- When communion is offered, attendees encouraged to bring elements from home

Baptisms will be part of worship services, unless there is an extenuating circumstance. Weddings and funerals will be permitted in the sanctuary with a strict attendance limit based on the need to maintain social distance between pews.

Church Meetings & Small Groups. Meeting virtually or indoors. Those groups choosing to meet indoors must inform a pastor at least 24 hours in advance each time a meeting occurs. Considerations for meeting indoors include:

- Maintaining social distance of at least six feet between households
- Face masks required for all attendees five years of age and older
- Abbreviated meeting length (30 minutes)
- Doors open no more than 10 minutes prior to meeting time
- Attendees asked to leave promptly when meeting is finished
- Attendees asked to limit restroom use as much as possible
- RSVPs or attendance recorded in case of a need for contact tracing

Staff & Lay Leadership. May work from home or from the building.

Children & Youth Ministries. Meeting virtually, outdoors, or indoors. In-person meetings will follow the same safety considerations listed for church meetings and small groups above.

Cleaning. Normal schedule resumes.

Community Groups. May meet indoors, and must follow all considerations outlined above for church meetings and small groups. Groups will be asked to follow additional cleaning procedures after each use of the building; cleaning guidelines will be developed based on CDC and public health recommendations.