

A black and white photograph of a stained glass window, viewed from a low angle looking up. The window features a complex, abstract pattern of dark, irregular lines forming a grid-like structure. Light filters through the glass, creating a play of light and shadow. A semi-transparent grey horizontal band is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the main title text.

FIRST SUNDAY BACK:

SOME QUESTIONS TO PONDER



Michigan Conference
The United Methodist Church

MAY 2020



IN THIS TIME OF UNCERTAINTY,

there seem to be more questions than there are answers. More problems than solutions. This publication will not supply you with everything you might be seeking, but it may provide you with the questions that you need to be asking.

This publication is designed as a series of questions in two major categories:

1. What needs to be done before the first Sunday of in-person worship?
2. What lessons have been learned, and how can ministry be conducted moving forward?

You are encouraged as individuals and as socially distanced groups to use these worksheets to answer questions so that you can begin thinking about what your church's ministry is going to be in both the days of relaxed restrictions and in the post-pandemic days that are ahead of us. Our churches could be on the verge of a new great awakening, and the way that they respond on that first Sunday back will set the tone for many more months of ministry.

PREPARING

The time to prepare is now. No one knows when it will be time for congregations to once again gather in their churches for corporate worship. However, in this time of waiting, now is the time to be engaged in effective planning for that day. One thing that Michigan faces is the vast geographic distances and many state laws and regulations.

It is important to note that when the governor and state health officials begin lifting restrictions, it will not mean that it is wise for every church to resume worship services. Each church needs to examine its own unique set of circumstances carefully. Federal, state, and local guidance should be considered in determining to resume worship once again. Likewise, local health authorities in each county and community should be consulted as to whether it is a safe time to resume services. Church leadership also needs to consider the risk placed on members carefully. Older adults and those with pre-existing health conditions are at higher risk of contracting COVID-19.

It is unclear how members will respond when allowed to return.

Some may be so out of the habit that the first Sundays back may have an underwhelming response to gather in-person. Churches may be asked to severely limit how many may gather, perhaps ten or fewer. Which ten people may get to attend?

In the sections that follow, are a series of questions designed to assist you in thinking about that first Sunday back. There are many things you need to ponder. These questions are not designed to give you answers. Instead, they have been developed for you to consider and come up with your own solutions that you may not have considered.

Please ponder these questions in socially distanced group settings. Consider using ZOOM, Go To Meeting, teleconferencing, or other means of virtual meeting.



SAFETY

The answers to the following, and other, questions need to be considered now. Thoughtful planning is essential for a successful first Sunday back. The answers to these questions will be different for each church. State limits on meeting size will impact your first gathering. As the rollout begins, you may face restrictions of 10, 25, or 50 people allowed to gather. How will your church cope with the fact that you might have 40 that want to come, but only ten would be allowed? Think through this issue before it happens and have a plan in place. Consider sending a message preparing members what they can expect when returning.

- How will people be greeted safely?
- Will you have masks available for those arriving without them?
- How will you address those not wishing to wear a mask?
- Do you expand the greeting by meeting persons in the parking lot?
- If you encounter a member who appears to be high risk, how will you address that situation?
- Where will you place hand sanitizer stations throughout the church?
- Will you be taking temperatures of those entering the sanctuary?
- How will we kindly advise those who wish to hug, shake hands, or not social distance?
- How will you signal social distance seating in the sanctuary?
- What special signage needs to be created around safely worshipping together?
- Will you remove high touch items like hymnals, pew pads, pencils, and offering plates?
- Can you avoid using bulletins by use of sanctuary technology?
- Can you email bulletins and inserts so they are not handled in the sanctuary?
- Are you able to distance worship leaders and musicians?
- Given the significant risk singing creates, will you allow congregational singing?
- When is it safe to bring the choir back?



WORSHIP

- What will happen on that first Sunday back?
- Will your first service be a parking lot service? If so, what plans have you made for this?
- Will there be baptisms?
- Will there be Holy Communion?
- Will there be a time of witnessing?
- Will there be special music?
- Will the pastor have a special message?
- Will there be a celebration?
- When will it be safe to begin providing beverages or share a common meal at church?
- Will Sunday School also start back up at the same time?
- There might be guests that day. Some of which have never been to your church. How might you greet these people to make their first time at your church less awkward?



GENEROSITY

Because patterns of giving have shifted and people may be giving in different ways be prepared for a less than full Sunday Offering. There will still, most likely, be persons that have been affected by furlough and or loss of a job. They may not be able to give as they once did.

Whatever you do, celebrate the fact that God has blessed your church and your community and your members and that their gifts will continue to help the church make a difference in its community.

- Are you hoping to receive a bountiful offering?
- Have you been engaged with financial/ stewardship emphases during this time of isolation?
- Do you offer electronic or online giving?
- What are your plans for receiving an offering, given it may not be recommended to pass and offering plate, baskets or buckets?
- Will you make a formal report of the church's finances available on that day?
- Will it be written or verbal?



FOLLOW UP

If the scenario of people flocking to church holds, then the church needs a plan to gather contact information on every person that is in the building on that first Sunday (wouldn't hurt to do so on the follow-up Sundays as well) back together for worship.

- How will your church replace pew pads and pencils?
- Do you use bulletin inserts?
- It might be time to ask everyone to fill out an insert so that you can verify that the church has correct contact information.
- What information do you need to get?
- At the very least, get a name, address, email, contact phone.
- You might also want to give them a chance to indicate: Member, First Time Visitor, Returning visitor, regular attendee.

You need to have in place a system that will allow you to contact each person that was not regularly attending before the pandemic shut down the church.

We recommend those persons be contacted by Monday noon by someone from the church.

MISSION AND MINISTRY

While in isolation, hopefully, the church has still had the opportunity to be in ministry.

- How will you provide a report to the congregation outlining the things that the church was able to do during the isolation?
- Did you feed people?
- Did you assist people with utilities?
- Did you regularly call and check on the shut-ins?
- Did you engage in other ministries?
- Celebrate what God was able to do through the ministries of the church during this pandemic.
- If you are brave enough, you might even allow time for a personal witness during the worship service.

Were there other ministries conducted on behalf of the church during the pandemic?





LOSSES AND CELEBRATIONS

During the service, you might need to mention the losses that occurred, especially since there is the chance that funerals could not be held.

- Who died? Mention them. Pray for the families.
- On the other side, what are the celebrations? Were children or grandchildren born?
- What about anniversaries? What about birthdays?

Can you think of other things to celebrate unique to your church or community?

IMPORTANT MEETINGS

In the time of isolation, meetings and decisions most likely were made. Perhaps via Skype or ZOOM or some other method.

Are there actions that need to be taken?

Does the Council, Board of Trustees, Finance team, SPPRC, Mission team etc. need to have a meeting now that may now be done face to face with proper distancing measures?

If so, schedule them, but don't burn everyone out with non-stop meetings the first Sunday back.

Ask these questions:

- What team needs to meet?
- Why does that team need to meet? How long will the meeting last?





LOOKING AHEAD

Some are predicting that until we get a vaccine that this may become a seasonal/annual virus. That means that we may go through this same sort of thing as soon as the fall and perhaps into the next year. Now is the time to start planning for that contingency as well. Don't wait until another COVID 19 type of pandemic comes along. Start planning for how your church can continue to be the church in the midst of an emergency. There is also the possibility of flood, fire, tornado, and other disasters. Is your church prepared to cope in the event that it is affected by such calamities? If nothing else, this pandemic opens our eyes to the fact that we must not wait until something happens and then respond. Instead, we should be actively looking at the scenarios that might occur in our communities and making plans to be the church even in the midst of such trying time.

In closing, are there other things that come to your mind? What is unique about your church setting and situation? Think about these things and anticipate how you will respond once things get back to normal.

HERE FOR YOU!

The Michigan Conference is working to equip every local church for the return to in-person worship. Worship safety guidelines are being developed and will be sent soon. In the meantime, visit the conference website MichiganUMC.org and check out the specific health crisis resources for your church. The conference can assist you with getting your worship online or via telephone, how to stay connected with your congregation, and setting up online giving to support your ministry and missions. Conference staff is always available to provide individual support.



Michigan Conference
The United Methodist Church

The Michigan Conference
1011 Northcrest Road
Lansing MI 48906
517-347-4030
www.MichiganUMC.org

*This publication is based on materials developed by Rev. Terry Goodman, Director of Clergy Services,
The Holston Conference of the United Methodist Church.*