



A MESSAGE FROM OUR BISHOP, SCOTT J. JONES

October 29, 2020

Dear people of the Texas Annual Conference,

I want to thank you for your continued creativity in ministry in 2020 during these days of COVID-19. These are not easy times, and I am proud of how our pastors are leading our churches while maintaining the practices of social distancing, hand washing and mask-wearing. Much of what we hear from our friends at the Methodist Hospital System is that spikes are likely to continue if we give into mask fatigue and relax our behavior, so keep up the great work.

I pray for you as you pastor in new ways in an unprecedented season in your specific context, especially as we move into a holiday season with so many significant days for our congregations. Below, you will see some general guidelines for in-person worship gatherings. Many of you are already providing members and guests with online worship opportunities. I certainly want to encourage you to add or continue to improve your online presence even as we cautiously extend our use of in-person venues.

As we move into Advent, I want to encourage you to think about keeping your church facility a safe home for our members and visitors.

Below, you will see some guidelines and recommendations to help you and the church that you lead to keep the first of Wesley's General Rules: Do no harm. Please read through these guidelines, consult your local government regarding safety protocols and visit with your leaders about establishing best practices for your congregation.

Many churches are devoting a page on their website to COVID-19 guidelines. I have included a sample from each of our districts to encourage you to communicate these best practices with your church members and guests.

With deep appreciation for all that you are doing for Christ,

Bishop Scott J. Jones

A MESSAGE FROM DR. MARC BOOM, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF HOUSTON METHODIST HOSPITAL SYSTEM

As we near the holiday season, I'd like to offer some tips on how you and your congregation can stay healthy and safe as we continue to battle COVID-19 and enter into our traditional flu season. This year, more than ever, it's important that everyone gets their flu vaccination. Not only will getting your flu shot protect you against the flu, but by keeping the number of flu patients low and out of our EDs and hospitals we can ensure we have capacity for COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 patients.

Our faith and spirituality continue to play an important role in how we deal with this pandemic. It's vitally important that we not lose touch with them. However, the most vulnerable among us (the elderly and those with pre-existing health conditions) should be encouraged to watch services from home if possible. Ask anyone who is not feeling well (including staff) to please stay home. Those attending services in person should always wear a mask and keep at least six feet between themselves and anyone from outside their household. You should also remind your congregants to not shake hands or hug before, during or after services.

After 9 months of having to deal with this pandemic many of us are beginning to suffer from COVID fatigue, which means we are more likely to drop our guard and choose to participate in risky behaviors. The holidays are an especially important time of the year for us. It's a time to get together and reconnect with loved ones we don't get to see very often. However, we know that 2020 is unlike most years. This Thanksgiving and Christmas ask your congregants to consider:

- Avoiding large gatherings and only celebrating with those in their immediate household
- If they want to celebrate with extended family or friends, doing so virtually to avoid contact
- Instead of attending parades or sporting events, watching them on TV
- Shopping online instead of in person

For those congregants who do choose to gather in person with extended family, particularly those bringing together family members who travel, they should plan to create their own "bubble" of sorts. Remember, a "bubble" is only as effective as the weakest link, so it must be a firm commitment. This would involve a number of actions including:

- very careful behavior by all participants two weeks before the gathering with a firm commitment from every individual to do their part
- symptom monitoring by all participants prior to the gathering; anyone with symptoms must cancel their involvement
- arrange for all participants to get a COVID-19 PCR test (not a rapid test) as close as practical to the start of the gathering
- drive to the destination if possible, but if you must fly, wear a mask (preferably an N95) and goggles or a face shield throughout the duration of the flight
- once together, stay together in the "bubble" and do not engage in high risk behaviors outside of the household

It's also very important that we continue to do the things that helped us curb the spread of the virus earlier this year. This includes always wearing a mask while in public, practicing social distancing by keeping at least six feet between ourselves and others and always washing or sanitizing our hands. These three actions have proven greatly effective against the virus.

You can find more great tips and advice on celebrating during the holidays on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's website at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/holidays.html#thanksgiving>.

I want to personally thank you for your strong leadership during this pandemic. It's your desire to keep your congregants safe that has helped us curb the spread of this deadly virus in our community. Please stay safe this holiday season.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dr. Marc Boom". The signature is stylized and cursive, with the first name "Marc" and last name "Boom" clearly visible.

Dr. Marc Boom
President, CEO
Houston Methodist Hospital System

RECOMMENDED GUIDELINES FOR SAFE CHURCH SERVICES FOR THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

Sanitation and Safety Measures

When cleaning the sanctuary and any shared spaces occupied by staff and/or members, regularly disinfect physical surfaces including pews, doorknobs, rails and restrooms with an EPA-approved cleaner (Can we imbed this link in the words EPA-approved cleaner? <https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-coronavirus-covid-19>), following its directions, before, between and after any gatherings. Remove unnecessary physical items to reduce shared contact, such as pens and greeting cards. Provide disinfectant wipes and hand sanitizer at church facilities and remind attendees to use them by making regular announcements or placing signs around the shared space.

Additionally, discourage church members and staff from in person visiting during the week unless absolutely necessary, as this limits exposure. If necessary, lock certain passages such as hallways and shared staircases if there is a more open route for people to enter the church campus. If the church has shared bathroom spaces, discourage multiple people from being in the bathroom at once by locking one or more stalls and posting a sign outside that asks people to wait outside. Encourage mask-wearing and social distancing during services, gatherings and meetings. Consider reinforcing these protocols by blocking off sections of the pews every six feet and supplying masks for those who forget to bring one.

Worship services

In addition to maintaining the aforementioned mask-wearing, social distancing, hand sanitizer, and cleaning guidelines during worship services, it is recommended that you eliminate access to any shared items such as hymnals and consider offering disposable paper handouts with song lyrics if displaying lyrics on screen is not an option.

Worship services potentially pose the highest risk of spreading germs compared to any other church activity, so please encourage and regularly remind congregants who belong to more vulnerable populations to stay home and join in with virtual services if at all possible. “At-Risk Population” is defined by the CDC as, “... those who are 65 or older, especially those with chronic lung disease; moderate to severe asthma; chronic heart disease; severe obesity; diabetes; chronic kidney disease undergoing dialysis; liver disease; or weakened immune system.”

Worship services can also be made safer by not including on-stage choirs and minimizing the worship band so that fewer members share a stage during that time period. Also, remind musicians to disinfect their instruments before and after services.

Follow CDC and state guidelines (along with your county and/or municipal guidelines) when opening the worship space. Consider starting reopening at 25% capacity, again encouraging those who can participate from home to do so.

The Sacraments: Communion and Baptism

When partaking in communion, you can minimize shared surfaces by providing disposable cups and packaged bread that members can retrieve themselves and encourage participants to retrieve the elements with the group or family with which they came to church. Or, have volunteers hand out the elements while wearing a mask and gloves.

For Baptisms, we strongly recommend mask-wearing and social distancing of participants.

Staff and volunteers

Staff and volunteers pose the highest risk of contracting and spreading the virus, so encourage them to stay home if they feel sick, even if their symptoms are not COVID-19 symptoms. Volunteers and staff should wear masks, socially distance and consider implementing health screenings such as taking their temperature upon arrival and sending home those with a fever.

Childcare and nursery

Regularly sanitize all shared surfaces in the nursery and childcare spaces, including changing tables, toys, doorknobs, chairs and tables using safe-to-touch spray before, during and after the children enter. Provide disinfectant wipes and hand sanitizer at multiple stations in and near the childcare spaces so that kids and parents are reminded to use them. Help children wash their hands, using generous amounts of soap, hot water and washing for at least 20 seconds. If possible, provide more disposable games and activities such as coloring sheets to limit shared toys.

Maintain a classroom size per CDC, state, and your county and/or municipal guidelines.

As COVID-19 cases continue to spike in Texas and the onset of colder weather exacerbates germ spreading due to closer contact for a prolonged period of time. It is, therefore, vital to remain *alert but not anxious*, continuing to follow CDC, state, county and/or municipal guidelines while innovating meaningful ways to gather as a community of saints and celebrate this significant holiday season.

District church guidelines

- **Central North:** Faithbridge Church, Spring, Texas - <https://faithbridge.org/covid-19/>
- **Central South:** St. Luke's Houston - <https://www.stlukesmethodist.org/worship-reservations/?fbclid=IwAR23FHeDE58DAcMWkRoZINb-ISMenXMP1B6jcPhSkSC9a09xuixoVhGOMB4>
- **East:** Livingston FUMC - <https://www.livingstonfumc.org/coronavirus>
- **North:** Longview FUMC - <https://www.longviewfumc.org/relaunch/>
- **Northwest:** Tyler Dayspring - <https://dayspringumc.com/covid/>
- **South:** Hope Church Pearland - <https://www.hopechurchpearland.org>
- **Southeast:** Beaumont Wesley - <https://www.wesleyumc.com/covid-19-update/>
- **Southwest:** Covenant Glen - <http://www.covenantglen.org>
- **West:** College Station Christ UMC - <https://www.christ-umc.org/covid-19/> on that page is a link to a deeper dive <https://www.christ-umc.org/am-site/media/christ-umc-phased-re-entry-plan-6-4-2020-v2.pdf>