COVID-19 Strategic Phasing Plan

As we proceed to reopen in phases, we encourage our congregation to use the metaphor of a light switch versus a dimmer switch. We will proceed much like a dimmer switch, and this may need to move up or down depending on the how the virus is affecting our local county and community.

Our Core Values for this Season:

1. **“Do No Harm” – Keep people safe**

The first [General Rule for Methodists](https://www.umc.org/en/content/the-general-rules-of-the-methodist-church?gclid=Cj0KCQjwnv71BRCOARIsAIkxW9G90x0theZzgR_JIWpSu0kxRTj4oJuTtSd6WOaHw1lmGxmrxq9kUqUaAldiEALw_wcB) is “do no harm.” The second is “do good.” If we follow both as a community of faith, it gives us a mandate to proceed with caution in a way that tries to mitigate spread of COVID-19 as we move forward. All in-person ministry will involve risk. We will strive to be agile enough that if data demonstrates need to move forward in phasing or backward toward earlier precautions, we will be prepared to do either until there is a biological answer to COVID-19.

1. **Create Community and Discipleship**

At SUMC we strive to do that through *worshiping, connecting, serving,* and *giving.* The way we have done that since March 9th has looked very different, but we are still committed to making disciples and creating new opportunities for spiritual community and growth. During this pandemic, we also are sensitive to the *quality of the experience* we have in each phase, so this will also be a guiding principle for decision making.

1. **Serve the Vulnerable**

God’s people are blessed in order to be a blessing to others (Genesis 12:2). We are also given a biblical mandate to go out of our way to serve those at the margins (Matthew 25:31-46). In our current context, that includes but is not limited to the elderly, the immunocompromised, those who are food insecure, the unemployed and underemployed, and those who are emotionally and mentally ill or distraught because of added stressors due to the virus or the secondary effects of the stay-at-home orders. In all that we do, SUMC is committed to finding new ways to serve our community with special attention given to those who are most vulnerable.

Ongoing Direction and Guidance:

As we move forward, we will continue to pay close attention to [Governor Cooper’s](https://www.nc.gov/covid19) plan and direction as well as guidance and suggestions from Bishop Ward and the NC Conference of the UMC and the [ongoing data and guidelines from the CDC for faith communities.](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/faith-based.html) Much of the phased plans below were adapted from this [conference guide](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fPgkffTsXrR_mKJ7TpnRzmmFBULI7E5Qpr8HskINeFU/edit) that was recently shared with churches and pastors. We have also been in very close and weekly contact with our town and local leaders in Swansboro and Onslow County. Decisions will be guided by the core values listed above and will be based on the best data and local information we can find.

In addition, we also acknowledge that there is a difference between real and perceived harm – and we desire to give some attention to both. Some communities of faith have opened in other parts of the country with many in the membership and larger community wondering if the church just doesn’t care. We are committed to being *fully transparent* in our communication so that we can make clear what we are doing to mitigate spread, reduce risk, and serve those who may have to remain physically distant for a much longer period of time than others. If (or perhaps a more accurate word would be “when”) the virus spread peaks in our area, we desire to be agile enough to act quickly and decisively as the situation may warrant.

**PHASE ONE (Began May 8th)**

In Governor Cooper’s plan, Phase One began when criteria noted in the linked plan were met. In summary, two weeks of declining cases of COVID-19, availability of PPE and an increase in testing and tracing capabilities. The Governor’s Reopening Plan can be found [here](https://governor.nc.gov/news/governor-extends-stay-home-order-through-may-8-plans-three-phase-lifting-restrictions-based) along with a helpful [FAQ here](https://files.nc.gov/governor/documents/files/FAQs-for-Phase-1-EO-FINAL.pdf).

SUMC Recommendations for Phase One:

1. Continue offering online worship services. Consider an outdoor worship option for when weather permits. Rain option would be to stream live from campus with just essential personnel.
2. Outdoor worship Option (Perhaps in early to mid-June):
	* + Do not pass out any bulletins or paper materials in order to avoid cross contamination (Use [bit.ly](http://bit.ly/) or another app/service for announcements, words to music and scripture.)
		+ Secure usher and other volunteers to meet families at their cars and guide them to space (appropriate PPE for volunteers - **minimum of 6 feet physical distancing between family units**).
		+ Encourage families to bring their own lawn chairs and/or blankets and stay together as a unit.
		+ Secure stage (hand made with wood or a trailer/flatbed truck)
		+ Offering - have an unmanned container that people can deposit money into, without touching, on their way in or out of the parking area.
		+ Passing the Peace is done with “eyes” and “waves” ;-)
		+ If sound system is good enough, some could remain in cars with windows down if they were more comfortable with this option.
		+ Communion offered and distributed to family units with masked and gloved ushers (We have ordered 6 cases of [Celebration Cups](https://www.amazon.com/Celebration-Cup-Prefilled-Communion-Juice/dp/B002TO6644/ref%3Dsr_1_1?crid=2HX9FAEIGKJZI&dchild=1&keywords=celebration+cups+communion&qid=1589551743&sprefix=celebration+cups%2Caps%2C171&sr=8-1) (250 each) to use for upcoming Sundays)
		+ Use Soccer Field and Parking on 1202 Hammock Beach Road

**MODIFIED PHASE TWO (May 20th)**

In Governor Cooper’s plan, the shift from Phase One to Phase Two is based on a re-evaluation of the situation using the original criteria. The Governor’s Modified Phase II can be found here: [Executive Order 141](https://files.nc.gov/governor/documents/files/EO141-Phase-2.pdf).

SUMC Recommendations for Phase Two:

Continue online worship but begin ramping up, training leaders and volunteers with new procedures and protocols, and preparing for in-person worship in July.

**Online Worship** (thinking in terms of an “online campus,” not just streaming live services)

1. Continue offering online worship services as there will be many who are at high risk and cannot join in-person or may not feel safe to return even if precautions are in place. Those at greater risk, over 65 or having under lying medical issues, should continue worshiping virtually.
2. Encourage small group “watch parties” and “dinner church” gatherings where people could gather in homes, on porches or in backyards with 10-12 people or less as individuals and families feel comfortable. We would provide special online content and home liturgies for these gatherings which may be a better quality spiritual experience than in-person worship during this season.
3. Encourage congregation members to connect virtually with God and one another through [the Love Feast](https://nccumc.org/love-feast/) until we can have communion in-person – using Celebration Cups when we do.
4. We would also stream the in-person worship services on all our media platforms.

Phase II Weekly Schedule will bring essential personnel into the building rather than relying on home recordings and this will begin on Sunday, June 7th.

Sundays:

* 8:30 AM Traditional (Building #2) Entrance through front and exit through the side (60 min. or less)
* 9:45 AM Living Room Online Worship (Building #1). Recorded or live streamed? A shorten version of our phase one online service designed specifically for viewing off campus. (45 min. or less)
* 11 AM Contemporary (Building #3) Entrance through front door right (far left and side for exits).

Wednesdays:

* 8:00 AM Morning Prayer (Zoom and streamed to FB Live)
* 12:00 PM or 7PM Public Theology Worship

**In-Person Worship** (Currently planned for July)

*(Please NOTE: Phase 2 did not change numbers for indoor gatherings as expected. Because of a* [*lawsuit and a federal judge ruling*](https://www.newsobserver.com/news/coronavirus/article242788161.html)*, churches are temporarily exempt with a further decision to be made on whether this is permanent on May 29th. The SUMC strategy team* ***does not recommend*** *proceeding under the exemption with our own plan at this time because of the core values listed above. The in-person recommendations below could still apply when data support limited capacity gathering indoors)*

1. Consider beginning two in-person services (one in building #2 and one in building #3), while maintaining at least 6 ft of space between family units in all directions. Question over whether this should begin in June or in July.
2. Singing: The choir may well be the last thing we can bring back in all the phasing. Data shows that aerosol droplets go up exponentially during singing. Will likely have to discourage congregational singing except by music leaders (kept to a 4-6 minimum) until further notice. Because this drastically changes the quality of the worship experience, we will also try to expand smaller at-home worship opportunities and watch parties with 10 or less people.
3. PPE (Personal Protective Equipment): Face coverings essential and required. This includes pastors and worship leaders before and after worship (but not while on stage or in chancel). Ushers and those assisting with pedestrian direction (entrance and exit doors) wear masks and gloves, as would any who assist with communion when we offer it. All asked to bring their own PPE, but we will have some additional on hand for those who don’t have any.
4. High risk individuals (people over 65 and those with underlying conditions), whether staff or volunteers, should be strongly encouraged to shelter in place.
5. Managing Congregation Size and Sanitation Protocols: How many allowed for each space depends on state guidelines. If it is a percentage of square footage (i.e. 40% of fire code occupancy for a room) we will adjust for each space. The buildings are currently receiving a deep clean now. They would also be cleaned after each use using [CDC guidelines](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/pdf/ReOpening_America_Cleaning_Disinfection_Decision_Tool.pdf). We would use the sanctuary once a week and building 3 once a week, which also gives us the seven day window beyond which the virus does not live on surfaces.
6. No childcare provided during this phase (those with kids can either come and sit as a unit or continue at home worship online or attend house/community gatherings. VBS and other children’s programming are still paused. We may want to consider other online or no-touch drop-off activities.
7. Consider having Children’s Message and Song for both live services. Do not ask children to come forward. Other content can be provided separate for the “online” content for watch-party or dinner church gatherings.
8. If a baptism takes place, ask the parents to hold the baby throughout rather than having the clergyperson do so.
9. Adjust practices of gathering the offering (one place of offering, no passing of plates)
10. Use no-touch alternatives for passing the peace (eyes and hand waves)
11. No printed/passed bulletins. Building #3 can use screens. Options for building #2 could be: 1) Share a link to the bulletin prior to worship and invite people to pull up on smartphones as the service begins 2. Place paper bulletins on pew/chairs, using gloved hands, several days before worship, individuals take bulletins home to dispose.
12. There will be no fellowship/coffee hour.
13. Restroom capacities that allow safe distancing should be thought through and posted.
14. There will be no receiving line after worship.

**Creating Community and Connection**

1. Bible studies, small groups and watch-parties meet in homes, on Zoom or a hybrid version.
2. Continue to tweak and develop interactive online content for Children and Youth.
3. Continue Zoom Book Reading Groups and offer new studies as interest and need arise.
4. Congregational Care continues to be offered through phone calls, online gatherings, letters, etc. Begin to assess need for calls each week, bi-monthly, or slowly move to once a month call check-ins. Move toward having member and regular attendee assigned to a “Class Leader” who will continue this calling ministry during and after pandemic.
5. Pastoral Care: Advertise and promote a Pastoral Care button on our website and/or posted call number.

**Serve the Vulnerable**

1. Distance Mission trips will remain unwise for some time. This is an ideal time for mission in the local area. Keep groups small so as not to overwhelm the ministries you serve.
2. Emphasize “day trip” work with Disaster Recovery. Identify a potential ERT team (Emergency Response Team) to be trained for ongoing work after the conference team has departed.
3. Continue work with county and local officials to address food insecure families through food distribution, collection and our food pantry.
4. Continue to assist individuals and families with Discretionary Funds as needed, encouraging those in need to contact church office and fill out an assistance form.
5. Continue to assess congregational needs (help with shopping, connection, visitation, grief support, etc.)
6. Retreats and lock-ins carry similar risks and such activities will be paused until Phase 3 or beyond.

**Office and Facilities**

1. Office functions begin to be on campus focused on essential operations. Those in the office should be wearing masks while in any shared space or common area; if you have more than one person in the office, make sure that surfaces, including the phone, are regularly sanitized.
2. Food pantry admissions one at a time. No more than 10 visitors in building at a time. Buzz in access. Sanitary safety station established for visitors.
3. Some staff may continue teleworking because of personal or family concerns.

1. Sanitize spaces routinely/after use, utilizing [CDC Guidelines](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/disinfecting-your-home.html). Will establish a prioritization list and completion list that could maybe be posted for public reassurance.
2. High risk individuals (people over 65 and those with underlying conditions), whether staff or volunteers, should continue to shelter in place.
3. Create a plan for sanitizing the worship space between services each week and also a training for other groups when in-person gatherings and small groups come back during phase III.

**Church Business, other Gatherings and General Info:**

1. Church councils and other leadership teams of less than 10 might consider meeting in person while wearing masks and maintaining social distancing or continue meeting online.
2. Other building users may only resume meetings of 10 or less once a person from that group has been training in proper cleaning protocols. Groups will be required to clean before they meet and after they conclude, paying attention to high-touch surfaces and restrooms.
* Post signs indicating symptoms and urging people to stay home/seek medical attention if they have symptoms.

* Maintain a good stock of tissue, soap, hand sanitizer and disposable paper towels for drying hands.
* When we become aware of someone in the church or a building user infected with COVID-19, we will seek to communicate with those that may have been near (contact tracing) and cooperate with the health department in mitigating spread.

**PHASE THREE**

In Governor Cooper’s plan, the shift from Phase Two to Phase Three is based on a re-evaluation of the situation using the original criteria. The Governor’s Reopening Plan can be found [here](https://governor.nc.gov/news/governor-extends-stay-home-order-through-may-8-plans-three-phase-lifting-restrictions-based) along with a helpful [FAQ here](https://files.nc.gov/governor/documents/files/FAQs-for-Phase-1-EO-FINAL.pdf).

SUMC Recommendations for Phase Three:

It is possible that conditions will not improve, but infections will increase again. In that case, physical distancing recommendations would need to be tightened temporarily in order to get back on track. Progress will not necessarily be linear. You can help by encouraging careful hygiene, adherence to physical/social distancing recommendations, encouraging people to stay at home if they have any symptoms of illness, and cooperating with contact tracers if they are diagnosed.

**Worship:**

* 1. We will continue to offer our phase three worship offerings (two in-person services with increased capacity and one online version).
	2. Continue to use no-touch alternatives for passing the peace, collecting offering, and liturgical resources.
	3. Continue to pause fellowship/coffee hour. Continue encouraging people to leave the building rather than mingling.

**Church Business:**

1. Office functions could resume as normal, with continued attention to cleaning.
2. Groups, teams, and committees could meet in person.

**In Closing**

It is possible that COVID-19 cases will spike, decrease, and increase again. The Cabinet and Connectional Staff will assess the threat and issue a return to the appropriately restrictive status.

Please send your questions for clarification to your District Superintendent.

This document will be regularly reviewed and updated.

#### **Recommended Reading/Viewing**

Below are resources gathered by the Wisconsin Council of Churches staff, roughly in order of urgency, from immediate understanding of this pandemic to a deeper understanding of how we might reconstruct how we do church on the other side of the pandemic.

* [Why Getting the US Back to Normal in the Next Couple Months is a Fantasy.](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/why-getting-the-u-s-back-to-normal-in-the-next-couple-months-is-a-fantasy)  *PBS NewsHour,* April 20, 2020.
* T[he Coronavirus in America: The Year Ahead.](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/18/health/coronavirus-america-future.html)  *New York Times,* April 18, 2020.
* [COVID-19: Now I understand King’s truth of the ‘inescapable web of mutuality’](https://baptistnews.com/article/covid-19-now-i-understand-kings-truth-of-the-inescapable-web-of-mutuality/#.XqGXyMhKg2w), Zachary Helton, *Baptist News Global,* April 21, 2020.
* [Church in these “VUCA” Times.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0uAKQXagwms&feature=youtu.be)  Jake Morrill.
* [24 Questions Your Church Should Ask Before People Return](https://kenbraddy.com/2020/04/18/20-questions-your-church-should-answer-before-people-return/?fbclid=IwAR0CK7qAs9twQiN6PCrAT3OvSdbNROR0e_VXLjyGqS4sX9pyETq6lc_gMfo). Ken Braddy, Jr.
* [The Four Spaces of Belonging.](https://pbs.twimg.com/media/EWDE5iRWkAALX3Z.jpg%20https%3A//bensternke.com/the-four-spaces-of-belonging/)
* [Leaders, It’s Time to Ask Critical Questions About the Post-COVID19 Church](https://um-insight.net/in-the-church/umc-future/leaders-it-s-time-to-ask-critical-questions-for-post-covid-1/?fbclid=IwAR2LlnL3uVvLk5SAi47vAi_ogQuiL-yMyA4d5Nw-yQmSNFnuU4jyL8Rx2Iw). John Thornburg, *United Methodist Insight,* April 14, 2020.
* [Distributed Church.](https://freshexpressionsus.org/distributedchurch)  Fresh Expressions.
* [How to Seize this Moment for Your Church.](https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2020/april/relaunching-church-how-to-seize-this-moment-for-your-church.html) Ed Stetzer.