

A RE-ENTRY PLAN FOR ZION LUTHERAN CHURCH



Finalized by Transition Team: June 11, 2020

Approved by Council: June 15, 2020

Next Scheduled Review: September 21, 2020, or earlier if necessary

Introduction

On Wednesday, March 11, 2020, members of Zion gathered for a midweek Lenten supper, brief study of pilgrimage and prayer labyrinths, and a quiet worship opportunity in Room 200 focused on walking the labyrinth. Although the novel coronavirus had been on the periphery of our thoughts by that time, none of us would have thought that our gathering that evening would be our last time together in our building. Little did we know that we were being prepared for a season of pilgrimage and of learning to be church in a new way. We have never stopped being the church in these days. We have never stopped worshiping together. Our interim online practices have not been perfect, but they have certainly been a blessing to us! Being able to see one another and hear one another each week has sustained us. We are the church scattered and dispersed, but we are still the church, and we will continue to be so.

The document you hold in your hands is the approved plan for how the people of Zion will live into that next season of unexpected and unfamiliar church life. As with the previous few months, these coming months will not be perfect. Experts tell us there is no 100% safe way to be together until a vaccine or treatment for COVID-19 is in place. No one knows how far we are from that time. While we know all gatherings come with a risk, we can take necessary (if inconvenient) steps to minimize those risks as much as possible for all who voluntarily decide to gather in person for worship or other gatherings. This document was created by a team of your brothers and sisters in Christ who call Zion home. They represent members of the building staff, members of council and the cabinet, leaders of both the 8:45 and 10:45 worship services, members with expertise in health care and insurance, and the interim pastor. Following its creation, the plan was then sent to council for consideration and approval. All of this is to say that this plan was created specifically by and for the Zion Lutheran Church community.

The challenges of being the church

It has been said already and it is worth stating again: the church has never been closed and we have never stopped being the church together. We have definitely been learning how to be the church in new ways! The call to follow Christ is never easy. It always comes with challenges and hardships for the sake of the world.

When it comes to COVID-19, there are other reasons why being the church together is especially challenging. In preparing this plan, members of the Transition Team weighed information from a number of respected sources, including the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the Ohio Department of Health (ODH), the ELCA (at both the churchwide and synod levels), Mennonite Mutual Insurance, and several other faith-based entities. These resources all agree that gatherings in church buildings carry especially high risks for spreading COVID-19. A recent NPR report listed attendance at indoor religious services among the most high risk activities.

Members of the Transition Team found great value in all of the data, reports, conference calls, and other resources we consulted during the planning period. The amount of information was frequently overwhelming. We look forward to providing educational opportunities for Zion members in the near future so that we can share with all of our brothers and sisters some of the most significant findings that support this plan.

As a place to begin, some of the sources of risk in church life identified by trusted resources include:

- Worshipers have traditionally been in close proximity to one another for an extended period of time
- They usually touched common surfaces, as well as one another, in the practice of worship
- They frequently sang and spoke together, both of which increase the spread of respiratory particles, both the larger “droplets” that fall onto surfaces and the exceedingly small aerosolized particles that circulate quickly in the air
- They reach out to one another in times of illness and loss
- They often represent demographics hard hit by the virus

In the state of Ohio, gatherings for the practice of religion have never been limited by governmental order. Zion has been worshiping in an online fashion not because we have been forced to, but because all of the previous statements are true. We have also been gathering online because we are called to live out our faith in the world through love of God and love of neighbor. It has been important to make choices in these previous weeks and months that reflect our love for our neighbors. This re-entry plan is another attempt to do so.

Overview of Zion’s Re-Entry Plan

No plan for next steps is perfect, but this one strives at least to be informed and faithful. It is:

- **Informed** – using data from trusted sources, knowing that information from those sources may change quickly in the future
- **Incremental** – phasing in aspects of church life over time rather than all at once
- **Reviewable** – being evaluated by the church council after two months, but also able to be adjusted quickly should a local or regional outbreak occur

- **Data-driven** – seeking external markers whenever possible to determine when to move to the next phase
- **Realistic** – remembering that there exist no 100% safe options for public gatherings
- **Faithful** – responding not out of fear, but out of humility about what we do not know and out of an abundance of care for the whole body of Christ and for our neighbors throughout the world
- **Servant-focused** – daring to live in ways that feel unfamiliar or awkward as an act of service and incarnate love
- **Connected** – maintaining connection with the Wayne County Health Department so that notification and tracing can be done if anyone connected with Zion becomes ill with COVID-19
- **Flexible** – remembering that no congregational choices are written in stone and that all of these decisions will be open to revision in the future

PHASE ONE (where we have been)

March 15, 2020 – May 15, 2020

External marker: Ohio governor and health department directors begin issuing orders related to COVID-19

- All staff work from home except for scheduled times to stop into the building to pick up needed items
- All persons entering the building with a key sign in and out and note the spaces in use
- Increased cleaning and disinfecting of in-use spaces
- DZ at 6 meal served “to-go” from the Larwill Street foyer; food pantry distributed at the door of the warehouse
- All meetings other than church council placed on temporary hiatus
- Church council meets more frequently than usual but by Zoom
- Call committee continues its work virtually
- All worship services offered in three formats:
 - liturgy and sermon posted on the website for personal in-home worship,
 - blended Zoom liturgy offered online (Sundays at 10:00 for regular weekly worship),
 - video of worship posted on the church’s YouTube channel
- Transition team begins meeting April 28th

PHASE TWO (where we are)

May 15, 2020 – present

External marker: Ohio begins the process of reopening, including offices and some businesses

- Building staff return to office but with additional social distancing and cleaning practices in place
- Reduced public hours are implemented
- Church council returns to regular meeting schedule (still by Zoom)
- Administrative office suite re-keyed on May 28th
- Transition team continues to meet

- Strategic planning team begins to meet virtually
- Signage added to all doors with health screening questions and required mask usage
- Congregational survey launched, results tabulated on June 2nd
- All other items remain the same as in PHASE ONE

PHASE THREE (where we are going next – in other words, this current plan)

Dates pending, but no sooner than mid-July

External marker: gatherings of 50 unrelated persons are allowed in Ohio

It is possible that this phase may be further divided into 3A and 3B; for example, one of the items under consideration is returning to in-person worship biweekly at first

Office Staffing and General Building Considerations

- Maintain limited public office hours for the time being
- Use only parking lot awning entrance (except for DZ and food pantry programming which will remain in the Larwill foyer and warehouse, respectively)
- Continue sign-in/sign-out practice during the week
- Increase hand sanitizer stations and move to no-touch options
- Continue to require masks by all in the building, including Sunday morning worship. People are encouraged to bring their own masks, but masks will also be available for those without one. Education about correct mask usage may be provided by our parish nurses
- DZ at 6 and food pantry continues as in previous phases except that masks are also handed out and screening questions are read verbally to all before they enter the foyer
- Remove pew seating in first floor hallways

Gatherings other than Worship

- Council and other committee continue to meet via Zoom or conference call
- Scouts provide re-entry plans to Zion before resuming in-person meeting

Worship

- Limit worship to the sanctuary for the present, where it is easier to maintain safe distancing and where there is increased air circulation
- Restrict access to lower and upper floors on Sunday morning, as well as other areas on the first floor (other than rest rooms which will, of course, remain accessible); adjust furniture in Room 200 as necessary
- Focus cleaning and sanitation efforts before and after worship on the spaces in use on Sunday morning (disinfecting is also helped because we will be worshipping in a single service and allowing a full week between gatherings)
- Begin with a single, blended in-person and live-streamed worship service on Sunday morning at 10:00 am
- Add an online Zoom fellowship meeting on Wednesday evenings at 7:00
- Sunday morning worship will be kept to 45 minutes in length
- The nursery will remain closed
- All additional items in the pews (hymnals, pew cushions, attendance pads, etc.) will be removed from the space; members are welcome to bring pew cushions from home as long as they take them with them at the end of worship)

- Attendance will be taken by a greeter at the main doors who will be located at a safe distance from those entering; this will replace attendance sign-in sheets and will also allow for contact tracing should that ever become necessary
- Many leadership roles (ushers, greeters, lectors, etc.) will be adjusted and training will be provided; some new roles will also be added, such as additional technology roles; we will be reaching out soon to identify those who are still (or newly) interested in assisting in these revised roles
- It is worth noting again that this plan is a work in progress and we will be prepared to adapt the plan as necessary; we will be watching both attendance trends and regional infection trends, for example

Specific changed elements in the liturgy:

- GATHERING
 - External and internal doors will be propped open for a no-touch entrance and exit
 - Health screening questions will remain at the entrance; anyone with exposure, symptoms, or a fever is asked to refrain from entering
 - All worshipers over the age of 2 are required to wear masks
 - There will be a one-way flow into and out of the space; ushers will direct worshipers on arrival and dismissal
 - Designated seating areas in the sanctuary will be indicated by the ushers, with a maximum “group” number of 50 (families counting as a single unit)
 - There will be no bulletins, singing, or spoken responses
 - Worshipers will not stand or move around during the service; once we are in our seats, we will remain there throughout worship
 - Offering plates will not be passed; plates will be available at the entrance and we will encourage increased use of online giving options; the blessing of gifts will continue to be part of the liturgy
 - Zion president Dan Shuman will continue to help us determine the best strategies for air circulation, including the use of air conditioning, windows, and fans; if possible, the internal stained glass windows may be opened to allow for an overflow area in Room 200 if needed
- WORD
 - Children will remain with their families for the children’s message
 - Readings from the lectern / pulpit will be behind plexiglass (we will also have plexiglass at the altar for when we return to the Eucharist); chancel furniture may be adjusted so that speakers are as far as possible from the first occupied row of pews
- EUCHARIST
 - We will share the peace in new ways, but there will be no physical or verbal sharing

- We will phase in Holy Communion after we have become comfortable with first steps and new general worship practices (this is one place where there is actually a Phase 3A and Phase 3B in our re-entry)
 - Once we are able to offer the sacrament of the Eucharist, we will decide what changes need to be implemented; for example, we may opt for a pre-packaged version of the elements or offer communion “in one kind” (partaking only of the bread); whatever decisions are made, we will let the congregation know about changes in advance of our communing together again for the first time
 - As with worship in general, communion practice, once begun, will involve less movement than normal
- SENDING
 - Dismissal will happen at the direction of the ushers, allowing people to leave the space while still maintaining a safe distance
 - Doors will again be propped open
 - We will exit through the same parking lot awning entrance
 - Fellowship time and other similar greetings will not be included

Final Comments

All members are encouraged to consider their own situation and risk status before deciding when to return to worship or other gatherings in the building. Our worshipping community will continue to include an active online expression for the foreseeable future. We will continue to have members of the Zion family who cannot be with us physically, so we will strive to make our virtual presence deeper and richer.

The transition team and Zion council know that not all members will feel the same about some aspects of this plan. The congregational survey yielded a couple of respondents, for example, who did not indicate a willingness to wear a mask while in the building for worship. While there is no 100% way to gather safely for worship, masks have been determined to be an important risk reduction strategy. Therefore, in order for this plan to be effective and for other brothers and sisters to worship as safely as possible, members who are unwilling to comply with the re-entry plan (including masks) will need to choose the online community, rather than the in-person community, for worship.

Finally, there is always the risk that we will need to move quickly to a fully online community again if there is an outbreak. The Family Ministries team, led by Tom McFadden will be creating a phone tree for quick notification of such changes.