

Guidelines for Attending Worship Services during the Coronavirus Pandemic

First Edition – May 8, 2020

Introduction

On Monday, April 27, Governor Reynolds announced that, effective May 1, the majority of Iowa counties – Mitchell included – will *begin* ‘opening.’ This means that restaurants, fitness centers, retail stores, farmers markets, and some other businesses will resume operations. But, this was not a complete lift of any and every regulation. Restaurants, fitness centers, and retail stores may only open at 50% capacity. There are also other specific rules for each respective business.

The governor also is now allowing churches to gather for worship without an official ‘limit’ on the number of people who gather for services. Just like with businesses, though, this does not come without some important qualifications. Churches must ensure that attendees are properly social distancing, and churches must increase sanitization and cleaning. The size of gatherings should also be limited as much as possible.

These expectations come, in large part, because the number of positive COVID-19 cases continues to be relatively high in Iowa. Increased testing can explain part of the increase, but the percentage of positive tests remains higher than expected. Approximately a quarter of Iowa counties will still be under heavy restrictions, because the number of cases is increasing or has not decreased for long enough. This is by no means over. We are not out of the woods, and COVID -19 is not going away anytime soon.

Practically, this means that we are still not close to returning to ‘normal.’ Even with larger church gatherings now allowed, we will proceed with caution. Everyone absolutely wants to be able to return to ‘normal.’ But, there is still much risk associated with the spread of the virus. Because of the risk involved, the church leadership has discussed guidelines that will be put into place until the danger becomes much less. These guidelines have been compiled with the help of Mitchell County Public Health, with the wisdom of other pastors and churches, and for the protection of the members of our congregation.

Please understand, the below guidelines are *not optional*. In other words, if you plan to attend a worship service when the church ‘reopens,’ you ***must follow the guidelines in order to participate***. Again, these are for the safety of everyone. In attending a service, you are taking a measured risk, just like you would when you go to the grocery store or anywhere else that other people are present and active. There is no way to bring the risk down to ‘zero,’ but the guidelines will ensure that we are all doing our part to protect ourselves and one another.

One final note: because there is risk involved, even if it is small and measured, those who are at high risk should continue to remain at home as much as possible. This means that those who are in higher risk age brackets, those who have underlying health conditions, and those who are uncomfortable in the setting of a small gathering should continue not attending worship services. But, ***you should not feel guilty about not attending right now***. Just because services will be held does not mean that it is safe for everyone to return. Until it is, please take comfort in knowing that you can still hear God’s Word proclaimed through the livestreamed service (available at 9:00 AM on Sunday). Pastor will do everything he can to keep you connected to the congregation, to give you God’s Word of grace, and to serve your spiritual needs as best as possible.

Planning to Attend

- If you have ***symptoms of any kind of sickness, absolutely stay home!***
- If you are at high risk for infection (for any reason), we strongly suggest you ***stay home!***
- Service size will be limited to 15 family units (immediate family living in the same house). So, instead of one big service, we will begin by holding smaller services. They will be held at 9:00 AM on Sunday, and 6:30 PM on Wednesday, beginning the week of May 17. More services may be added if necessary.
- For the sake of preparation, **members are required to contact Pastor to inform him which service they plan to attend, and if they desire to take communion. You must do this beforehand to attend.**

- A mask is *required* for those who are worshipping. Please plan on wearing it the entire time you are in the building. If you are in need of a mask, please contact the church office for help.
- Plan on observing proper social distancing! This means staying at least *six feet away* from those who are not in your immediate family group.
- Hand sanitizer will be available for those in attendance.
- Restrooms will be open, but we encourage you to use the restroom at home before coming to church. If you need the restroom, there will be disinfectant wipes available for wiping off surfaces that you have touched. Because of the space available in the restroom, we ask that you also limit it to one person/family unit at a time.
- You are certainly welcome to bring your own hand sanitizer or sanitizing wipes if you so desire.
- Remember, washing your hands properly with soap and water is just as – or more – effective as using hand sanitizer. It would be wise to wash your hands thoroughly before attending a service.

Arriving at Immanuel

- When you arrive, please park on the north side of the church.
- If the weather is nice enough, doors may be propped open. Otherwise, an usher will be posted at the door to open it for you. Please do not touch the doors, if possible.
- An usher will escort you to a marked pew. Please stay in your pew, so that we can observe proper social distancing. Bulletins will be available in your pew.

Worship & Communion

- To reduce the amount of surfaces that need to be sanitized between uses, all hymnals and Bibles will be removed from pews, as will the pew cushions. Everything will be printed in the bulletins.
- Communion will be offered at each service, but you are not required to receive it to attend (but see above). Pastor will have sanitized the Communion-ware and his hands before giving Communion.
- If you are communing, please wait for an usher to release your pew.
- Pastor will distribute alone with his mask on. After each family group comes forward, Pastor will gently drop the bread in the hands of those communing (or bless those who are not receiving). The cups will be placed sparsely in the tray, so that communicants are only touching the cup they plan to take. Those communing may lower their masks to commune, but should replace them once they are done communing. Pastor will offer a short dismissal (“Go in peace”) and will speak the usual dismissal (“Now may the body and blood...”) to everyone once Communion is over. When communicants are done with the cups, they may place them in the container available in the front before returning to their pews.
- If you are not communing, you may remain in your pews and sing or pray during the distribution.
- Offering plates will *not* be passed. Instead, they will be placed at the back of the sanctuary if you would like to leave an offering on your way out.

Following the Service

- An usher will come up to allow one family unit at a time to exit the sanctuary. Please wait until the usher releases you before heading out from your pew.
- If you have your offering, please drop it in the plate on your way out of the sanctuary.
- Bulletins may be dropped in the recycling bin on the way out of the sanctuary.
- You are welcome to sanitize your hands on the way out of the sanctuary.
- There will be no hand-shaking on the way out. Again, please practice social distancing!
- There will be ***no fellowship time*** in the church building following the service. Please ***do not congregate*** in groups of any size in the fellowship area, but instead head directly outside. There will also be ***no Sunday school or Bible classes*** for the near future.
- The doors will either be propped open (in nice weather) or an usher will be stationed at the north door to open them for you. Please do not touch the doors or door handles, if possible.