

# Keeping Our Churches Safe

Dear Indiana Conference Church Family:

On Friday, May 1, Indiana Governor Eric Holcomb announced a five-stage plan for reopening businesses and public facilities in the state of Indiana which have been shut down for the last two months due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, he stated that churches can reconvene starting May 8 and provided recommended minimal health protocols that are designed to help protect the health and safety of members.

The government's guidelines for reopening are very cautious, knowing that the virus will continue to impact our communities for some time - presumably until a vaccine is discovered. The guidelines stress the importance of continued vigilance in observing practices that protect everyone, especially those that are at-risk and most vulnerable. If the number of new COVID-19 cases rises in the next few weeks, they may slow down the implementation of the stages, even moving back to a previous stage if necessary.

As our churches prepare to return to their respective places of worship, we recognize **that each local congregation will need to decide when they will choose to reopen**. Church leadership should discuss this in a very transparent and cooperative manner and strive for consensus among the leaders. There will not be a one-size fits all policy on the timing to reconvene. **Churches are not required to open for live services until they feel it best for the health and safety of their members.**

Once churches decide to open for worship, the conference leadership team is strongly recommending that each congregation follow the health protocols provided by the governor, as well as the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines. Some guidelines (e.g. the size of social gatherings, at-risk individuals, or use of face masks) will vary depending on the stage we are in at the time. It is important for local churches to be aware of and comply with any new announcements by federal, state, county, or city leaders that will affect in-person services.

## **A Summary of Governor Holcomb's Recommended Minimum Health Protocols for Places of Worship (effective May 8)**

1. Ask all individuals who are 65 and above or who have an underlying at-risk health condition to stay at home and watch services online. (Note: This demographic is still under the stay-at home order through May 23, at which time it is recommended they venture out cautiously.)
2. Ensure six feet between individuals or family units of the same households during services.
3. Space and mark seating, alternating rows when possible.
4. Clean between each service and disinfect high-contact services regularly.

5. Place hand sanitizers in high-contact locations (e.g. bathroom, entry, exit) and ask staff, members, and guests to sanitize their hands before entering the building.
6. Recommend putting on a face covering before entering the building. (Note: This recommendation becomes optional starting June 14).
7. Consider placing signage telling staff, members, and guests to not enter if they are symptomatic or if they have tested positive for COVID-19.
8. Implement non-contact greetings.
9. Avoid handing out materials.
10. Keep water stations/fountains, refreshment centers, potlucks, and other self-service stations closed.
11. Establish safe protocols for any communion and collection to avoid contact.
12. Dismiss services in a way that supports social distancing.
13. Place readily visible signage to remind everyone of best hygiene practices.

Along with these minimum health protocols, the governor is making the following additional recommendations:

1. Consider waiting to reopen the preschool and/or children areas until schools reopen (no earlier than July 4). If opening before the recommended date, do not place masks on children age two (2) or under per CDC guidelines, and limit leaders in the preschool and children's areas to those who do not have pre-existing conditions and those under age 65. (Note: Since it is difficult to ensure social distancing for young children, some churches may want to initially offer only live worship services. Later, consideration can be given to adding live adult and children Sabbath School programs.)
2. Clean entire facility (e.g. shampooing carpets, sanitizing bathrooms, doorknobs, light switches, and microphones).
3. Consider offering multiple service times to encourage a greater opportunity for social distancing.
4. Consider having a sign-up for services to allow for an attendance and capacity plan.
5. Consider suspending in-person praise teams or choirs and using previously taped performances. If in-person teams are used, use proper social distancing and limited team members.

The "Back on Track Indiana Plan" from Governor Holcomb outlines a full reopen date of July 4. Hopefully, we will realize this goal with few delays in the interim.

While these guidelines and recommendations will enable us to reopen our churches, we hope that these steps will be a blessing to all who participate in church life once again.

Much uncertainty remains regarding the COVID-19 crisis. We must continue to pray for God's blessings to rest upon the Indiana Conference. May we rely on our God who is "our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Ps 46:1). Jesus, prior to ascending to heaven, promised: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth...and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." How grateful I am that Jesus is in control and He will get us through these difficult times. Let us continue to rely upon His providence, protection, and provision. One day soon Jesus is coming, and we will be with Him in heaven. All our current challenges will fade into history as we experience love and joy through the ceaseless ages of eternity.

In His Service,

Pastor Vic