



Back to the Building Plan

Phase Protocol

O God, you have called your servants
to ventures of which we cannot see the ending,
by paths untrodden, through perils unknown.
Give us faith to go out with good courage,
knowing not where we go,
but only that your hand is leading us
and your love supporting us,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
+ *Prayer of Good Courage*

Resetting our Expectations

The Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth “Christ is just like the human body – a body is a unit and has many parts...[T]he parts of the body that people think are the weakest are the most necessary. The parts of the body that we think are less honorable are the ones we honor the most....You are the body of Christ and parts of each other.”

These days our bodies – our own and our larger Body of Christ - have seemed particularly vulnerable and uncertain. We have watched our community, our country, indeed the whole world, come together and express the very sentiments that Paul wrote about – that **the most vulnerable in our communities are precious and important to us, so much so that we will put our ordinary comforts and preferences aside to protect them.** Jesus reminded us how indispensable this kind of love for one another is when he said, “I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.”

In the beginning of all this, many of us had mental images of all returning at once to our church buildings in celebration. But **we are now recognizing that returning to the church building will have to happen in phases.** Governor Steve Bullock has released the “Reopening the Big Sky” plan to reopen Montana. **We have designed this document to follow the phases in the state’s plan. When Montana moves from one phase to another, we will put the corresponding plan for our church into action.**

What future we will find ourselves in depends not only on the behavior of the virus, but on the actions of people – as individuals, churches, communities, and governments. The way forward will not be a matter of following a timetable, but of faithfully discerning the signs of the times, and responding accordingly. It has always been that way for the church.

Please understand: **for at least the next year, we anticipate our lives to be shaped by the timeline set by COVID-19.** We face difficult choices between conflicting needs and imperatives. If we don’t continue our efforts to contain the virus, a new wave of infections and deaths will cause further damage, and we will lose what we’ve gained from the measures we’ve already taken. And if we push the envelope too far by reopening our buildings and resuming gatherings prematurely, we may unfairly force on our more vulnerable members the choice between keeping themselves and others safe and participating in congregational life like everyone else.

This is a developing document, created in consultation with public health experts, church leaders, clergy, and with guidance from our District Superintendents and Bishop. We believe **this serves several important purposes:**

- It places care for the health and safety of the most vulnerable parts of our Body of Christ at the forefront, while also caring for the spiritual needs of the whole Body.
- It offers a transparent road map for the next year or so of our life together, including the possibility of moving back and forth between phases if second or third waves of infections emerge.
- It allows us to discern the needs and expectations for leadership, volunteers, and all those who use our buildings (worship attendees, small groups, staff, community groups, etc.).

We pray for your continued patience, wisdom, and grace as we move through this process together. We pray for the researchers and medical professionals; for the planners; for the ill and recovering; for those grieving and struggling with the weightiness of these times. We pray for the watchers and the wonderers, and all those who wait upon the Lord.

An important note: This plan was put together by the five United Methodist Churches in Billings in order to have a uniform response to Covid-19. It was also designed to allow for flexibility between each of the individual churches which vary in size, population, and ministry needs. This is the protocol for Grace, [approved by Grace’s Church Council.] While most aspects of the plan are the same, there will be some differences in the details of building use and approach among the churches.

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A PHASED APPROACH TO RETURNING TO THE BUILDING

Stay At Home

While the state, county, or community is under a “Stay At Home” order, people should refrain from non-essential business and travel. When going out in public, it is recommended that everyone wear a mask or face covering.

Worship

The churches will hold online worship services only. The content of the services will be recorded from home or from the church provided that the pastor and a maximum of one another person is present to record.

Life Rituals (weddings, funerals)

Apart from extreme circumstances, all life rituals will be postponed until the stay home order is lifted. If it is not possible to postpone, attendees should be limited to 10 or fewer people including the pastor.

Pastoral Care

All pastoral care, including care for those nearing death, and care for the grieving, will be provided remotely.

Small Groups

Bible studies, small groups, etc. will meet online.

Staff

Minimal, drop-in staffing sufficient for essential operations (deposits, mail processing, etc.)

Building Use

The building will be closed to all groups.

Required Volunteers

- Phone tree
- Writing letters
- Essential church leadership (Church Council, Trustees, Finance, Staff-Parish Relations meet online as needed or scheduled.)

Phase One

In the Re-Opening the Big Sky plan, Phase One begins when there is sufficient ability to test and do contact tracing, when hospitals can safely treat all patients (both COVID-19 and those with other conditions), and there is adequate personal protective equipment and other supplies.

During Phase One, vulnerable populations (defined as people over 65 years of age and/or those with serious underlying health conditions) should continue to follow the stay at home guidance. Members of households with vulnerable residents should be aware that returning to public environments risks carrying the virus back home.

Worship

The churches will continue holding online services only. The content of the services can be recorded at home or in the sanctuary with multiple participants, while maintaining at least 6 feet of space between people with greater distance between those who are singing.

Life Rituals (weddings, funerals)

All life rituals should be kept to 10 or fewer people in attendance. Live-stream of the services can be set up if this is desired by the family. Receptions will not be held.

Pastoral Care

Care for those nearing death or for the grieving may be conducted in person as visitation is allowed by hospitals or facilities. All other pastoral care should be provided remotely.

Small Groups

Bible studies, small groups limited to 10 or fewer people may meet with the permission of the pastor. The building will be open for groups on Tuesdays and Thursdays only. The following guidelines must be adhered to be small groups using the building:

- Groups must use the main doors (the doors leading into the Gathering Area) and are limited to using the Gathering Area, the Fireside Room, and the bathrooms in the main hallway.
- Groups must maintain social distance, refrain from physical contact, and wear masks or other facial protection.
- Groups may not serve food or beverages at their gatherings.
- Groups must sanitize the doors upon entering the building, and sanitize all surfaces they come into contact with during their time in the building, including furniture, bathrooms, light switches, door handles and knobs, etc before leaving the building.
- High risk individuals should continue to stay at home.

Staff

Church secretary and other staff may resume work in the office for essential operations. The building will remain closed for non-essential or unscheduled drop-ins. Members of the congregation are asked to call the office if there is something they need, but not come into the building.

Building Use

Outside groups limited to 10 or fewer people may return to the building with the permission of the pastor. The building will be open for outside groups on Tuesdays and Thursdays only. The following guidelines must be adhered to be small groups using the building:

- Groups must use the main doors (the doors leading into the Gathering Area) and are limited to using the Gathering Area, the Fireside Room, and the bathrooms in the main hallway.
- Groups must maintain social distance, refrain from physical contact, and wear masks or other facial protection.
- Groups may not serve food or beverages at their gatherings.
- Groups must sanitize the doors upon entering the building, and sanitize all surfaces they come into contact with during their time in the building, including furniture, bathrooms, light switches, door handles and knobs, etc before leaving the building.
- High risk individuals should continue to stay at home.

Required Volunteers

- Phone tree
- Writing letters
- Making masks for distribution at the church for those who don't have them (preparation for Phase 2)
- Essential church leadership (Church Council, Trustees, Finance, Staff-Parish Relations meet online as needed or scheduled.)
- Volunteers (non-vulnerable, healthy individuals) to clean and sanitize the building on Wednesdays and Fridays after groups have met in the building.
- Trustees overseeing building maintenance and cleaning

Phase Two

Because the shift from Phase One to Phase Two will require a good deal of volunteer training and other logistical shifts, we will conduct an online only worship service for the Sunday following the announcement of the Phase Two shift.

Worship

The churches will begin conducting in-person worship with a live-stream that will allow people to stay at home as needed. The following guidelines will be adhered to when in-person worship resumes:

- People will be spread out in the sanctuary with one household per pew, and a row of pews skipped in between. When the sanctuary is at capacity (50 people), there will be other rooms in the church set up for individuals to watch the live stream while maintaining social distance.
- All people must maintain physical distance and refrain from greeting one another with handshakes, hugs, etc.
- All attendees should wear a mask or facial covering. Churches will provide masks for those who do not bring their own.
- Alternatives for bulletins, passing the offering plate and attendance pads will be put into place.
- Churches will not hold fellowship hour before or after worship. People are encouraged to leave the building following worship.
- Communion will be served using individual wafers and cups. Those serving communion should wear masks and gloves.

Life Rituals (weddings, funerals)

All life rituals should be kept to 50 or fewer people in attendance and maintain the same physical distancing restrictions as worship. Live-streaming of the ritual can be made available for those who can't attend in person according to the desire of the family. Receptions will not be held.

Pastoral Care

Normal routines of pastoral care will resume to the extent that visiting is allowed at hospitals or other facilities. In-person pastoral care or counseling will be done at the discretion and discernment of the pastor.

Small Groups

Groups may meet in the building at the permission of the pastor. The building will be open for groups on Tuesdays and Thursdays only. The following guidelines must be adhered to be small groups using the building:

- Groups must use the main doors (the doors leading into the Gathering Area) and are limited to using the Gathering Area, the Fireside Room, and the bathrooms in the main hallway.
- Groups must maintain social distance, refrain from physical contact, and wear masks or other facial protection.
- Groups may not serve food or beverages at their gatherings.

- Groups must sanitize the doors upon entering the building, and sanitize all surfaces they come into contact with during their time in the building, including furniture, bathrooms, light switches, door handles and knobs, etc before leaving the building.

Small groups where physical distancing cannot be observed (nursery or children's Sunday School, for example) will not meet.

Staff

Regular office functions will resume. Members of the congregation coming to the office are asked to continue to observe physical distancing measures.

Building Use

Groups limited to 50 or fewer people may use the building at the permission of the pastor. The building will be open for outside groups on Tuesdays and Thursdays only. The following guidelines must be adhered to be small groups using the building:

- Groups must use the main doors (the doors leading into the Gathering Area) and are limited to using the Gathering Area, the Fireside Room, and the bathrooms in the main hallway.
- Groups must maintain social distance, refrain from physical contact, and wear masks or other facial protection.
- Groups may not serve food or beverages at their gatherings.
- Groups must sanitize the doors upon entering the building, and sanitize all surfaces they come into contact with during their time in the building, including furniture, bathrooms, light switches, door handles and knobs, etc before leaving the building.

Required Volunteers

- Greeters at all doorways who, while maintaining a distance of six feet from those entering the building, can assist in tracking how many people are entering the building and guiding them to the appropriate worship space. (Greeters should not open the doors, doors should be propped open)
- Ushers in each of the worship spaces to help ensure people maintain social distancing protocols.
- Communion Servers who are healthy and able to ensure all people are served communion in their seats using safety measures.
- An adequate number of volunteers (non-vulnerable, healthy individuals) who will sanitize and clean all surfaces that were touched during worship.
- Volunteers (non-vulnerable, healthy individuals) to clean and sanitize the Fireside Room on Wednesdays and Fridays after groups meet.

Phase Three

Worship

Churches will offer in-person worship along with a livestream experience. The following guidelines will be adhered to during this phase:

- Physical distancing is still recommended at this stage. Members of the congregation should refrain from “packing the pews” and sitting close to people who are not part of your immediate household.
- Attendees should refrain from greeting one another with handshakes or hugs.
- Alternatives for bulletins, passing the offering plates and attendance pads will continue.
- Communion will be served using individual wafers and cups. Those serving communion should wear gloves.
- Fellowship Time will resume but food and drinks will not be served.

Life Rituals (weddings, funerals)

All life rituals can return to normal, provided there is sufficient room in the sanctuary to maintain physical distance. When the sanctuary has reached capacity, alternative locations in the building will be made available for people to view the ritual via livestream. Public livestreaming of the ritual can be made available for those who can't attend in person according to the desire of the family. Receptions will not be held.

Pastoral Care

Normal routines of pastoral care will continue.

Small Groups

Groups may meet in the building. Groups should maintain adequate physical distance and refrain from physical contact. Nursery and Sunday School may resume.

Staff

Regular office functions will continue.

Building Use

Groups may meet in the building. They should take care to maintain adequate physical distance and refrain from physical contact.

Required Volunteers

- Usual volunteers it takes to run normal church operations

In the Event of a Confirmed Covid Case in the Congregation or Among Building Users

- If the person has been in worship or a group at Grace within the last 30 days, they should notify the pastor.
- Pastor/leadership will notify the health department.
- The congregation will be notified by email. The pastor will consult with the person who was diagnosed or their family about whether they would like their name used in the notification or they would prefer to remain anonymous.
- Cleaning and sanitizing of the building will be done by a professional cleaning service in accordance with health department and CDC instructions.
- The building will be closed, all in-person worship and group gatherings will be suspended, and the staff will be instructed to work from home until the building is fully cleaned and sanitized.
- Anyone who came into direct contact with the person or is at risk of exposure (including staff and members/attendees) is highly encouraged to self-quarantine for 14 days.