

# **Updated Recommendations for Reopening Church Facilities**

Conference Office, Hawai'i Conference United Church of Christ (February 2021)

## **Autonomy of the Local Church**

Decisions about resuming in-person gatherings in your church rest in your hands, not in the hands of government officials or of the Hawai'i Conference staff. This resource has been designed to be a starting point for meaningful conversation among your local church leaders as you revisit your own protocol or policy for in-person gatherings at the time of vaccination rollout.

## **Ethical Commitments**

We are reminded that loving our neighbors is an inherent call of the Christian faith. All entities within the Conference and partnered with the Conference are bound by the covenant to share God's aloha in all circumstances as widely as we can. To enhance our aloha, the Conference office suggests continued compliance with all federal, state, and county laws and ordinances regarding the novel coronavirus and the health of your congregation.

Respect for one another's well-being continues to form our ethical compass. At the heart of respect is our ability and responsibility to keep each other safe and free from harm. It is our place as kahu and congregational leaders to guide our congregants into respectful and loving behavior toward one another during the continuing COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Working with New Understandings of COVID-19**

What we know about the spread and risks of the coronavirus has changed significantly since the pandemic began. These recommendations reflect what we know (mid-February 2021). They are derived from a variety of scientific, ministry, and government sources, examples of which are referenced. Recommendations can vary depending on your island context. Further, these updated recommendations are designed to resource your congregation in its process of discerning when to return to in-person gatherings as the vaccine rollout takes place.

We acknowledge that some congregations returned to in-person worship pre-vaccine and this set of recommendations may or may not apply to those situations.

## **Encourage People to Be Vaccinated**

The more people in each congregation are vaccinated, the safer it will be for churches to resume meeting in person. Some individuals will not be eligible for the vaccine based on their health conditions. However, partnering with community health organizations offering information about vaccines, supporting people as they express anxiety about receiving or not qualifying for a vaccination, and listening to and providing opportunities for your members to relate their vaccination experiences will be important aspects of pastoral ministry in months to come. You may consider creating care teams to provide valuable ministry in this regard.

As is presently published, the vaccination rollout in Hawai'i will take six months from January to June. The Wisconsin Conference of Churches recommends waiting until vaccination levels reach 50-75% of the general population before considering in-person gatherings. The Southwest Conference finds it a best practice for churches to wait until 50-75% of your

congregation receive both vaccinations before returning to in-person gatherings. We offer these ideas as items for conversation. The Hawai'i Conference office also recommends ongoing attention to spread rates on your island. Spread rates are tracked at the Department of Health's website: <https://health.Hawaii.gov/coronavirusdisease/>.

To further understand risks levels, we encourage congregational leaders to be in touch with your Mayor's office. Acknowledging there are a variety of reasons why people may not be vaccinated, the Conference office strongly recommends **not** requiring vaccinations as a condition of participation.

### **Phased Reopening**

The HCUCC office recommends congregations plan for a phased reopening of facilities to test plans and to ensure protocols are adequate and manageable for larger gatherings.

- Continue online presence even as facilities open to in-person gatherings.
- Return to in-person gatherings in small and measured ways:
  - Not all churches will resume in-person gatherings at the same time.
  - Not all church activities should return at the same time.
  - Group size impacts the risk for spreading COVID-19. Small group gatherings will be safe to resume before large group gatherings, which allows a church to build capacity toward a full return of people and activities.

### **COVID-19 Risk Assessment Planning Tool**

Following the example of the Southwest Conference, the Hawai'i Conference office also encourages local church leaders to use the *COVID-19 Event Risk Assessment Planning Tool* (<https://covid19risk.biosci.gatech.edu/>) to determine the risk an in-person gathering of people might pose to participants.

This tool, provided by the Georgia Institute of Technology, determines "the estimated chance (0-100%) that at least 1 COVID-19 positive individual will be present at an event in a county, given the size of the event." Please note, this is not the same as the risk of any person being exposed or infected with COVID-19 at the gathering. However, knowing the likelihood of one COVID-19 positive person being present at an activity, can help church leaders decide if the benefits of holding the event outweigh the possibility of exposing participants to a COVID-positive person. In your congregation's protocol or policy for holding in-person gatherings, you will need to determine the thresholds you will use to allow gatherings of various sizes to take place.

Thresholds will include both group size and the risk factor. For example, as of 2/09/2021:

- Hawai'i County:
  - A gathering of 20 people has a 2% chance of a COVID-positive person being present.
  - A gathering of 50 people has a 4% chance of a COVID-positive person being present.
  - A gathering of 100 people has a 7% chance of a COVID-positive person being present.
- Maui County:
  - A gathering of 20 people has a 7% chance of a COVID-positive person being present.

- A gathering of 50 people has a 17% chance of a COVID-positive person being present.
- A gathering of 100 people has a 31% chance of a COVID-positive person being present.
- Oahu County:
  - A gathering of 20 people has a 4% chance of a COVID-positive person being present.
  - A gathering of 50 people has a 9% chance of a COVID-positive person being present.
  - A gathering of 100 people has a 17% chance of a COVID-positive person being present.
- Kauai County:
  - A gathering of 20 people has less than 1% chance of a COVID-positive person being present.
  - A gathering of 50 people has less than 1% chance of a COVID-positive person being present.
  - A gathering of 100 people has less than 1% chance of a COVID-positive person being present.

### **Layered Strategy to Prevent Viral Spread**

The Center for Disease Control recommends using layered or multiple strategies for COVID-19 spread mitigation to lower the risk of exposure:

- Masks need to be worn by all participants during the entire duration of all in-person gatherings regardless of size or the vaccination status of participants for the foreseeable future.
  - People who are asymptomatic, who have recovered from COVID19, and even people who have been vaccinated can spread the virus to other people.
  - Physical distancing does not reduce the need for wearing masks. It works in tandem with other strategies.
  - Vaccination does not prevent an individual from being infected with the virus and spreading it; vaccinations can reduce the chance of someone becoming ill and can reduce the severity of a person's illness if they are infected.
- Physical distancing practices need to continue at all in-person activities regardless of size for the foreseeable future.
  - The distance currently recommended by the CDC is at least 6 feet.
  - Both early and recent scientific studies suggest a larger distance is necessary for activities that include public speaking, and especially singing.
  - The Southwest Conference, after reviewing the CDC definition of "close contact," the typical duration of church gatherings, and identifying that "successful infection = exposure to virus x time," recommends 9 feet when planning for physical distancing in worship, interactive study groups, fellowship conversations etc.
  - For singers and public speakers, the Southwest Conference recommends 12 to 15 feet between performers and between performers and their audience.
  - The number of persons involved in any gathering needs to be limited by the event location's capacity for maintaining physical distance.
- Hand washing remains a CDC recommended COVID-19 mitigation strategy. This is especially important when performing sacraments, distributing communion, and other

activities that involve passing items between individuals. Wearing gloves and planning contactless methods for common activities in worship remain best practices.

- Maintaining a “low touch environment” is a best practice for in-person gatherings.
- Cleaning surfaces was a major emphasis early in the pandemic. Recommendations have changed since the pandemic began. The current CDC recommendations include:
  - Areas unoccupied for 7 or more days need only routine cleaning.
  - Maintain existing cleaning practices for outdoor areas.
  - Routinely disinfect frequently touched surfaces at least daily.
  - The latest CDC guidance about cleaning surfaces is available online here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>.
- Ventilation and air flow play critical roles in mitigating the spread of COVID-19 according to recently published research. In December 2020, the CDC updated guidelines for ventilation in buildings. The Hawai'i Conference office strongly recommends implementing as many of those guidelines as possible:
  - Increase outdoor air ventilation, using caution in highly polluted areas.
  - Decrease occupancy in areas where outdoor ventilation cannot be increased.
  - Increase airflow to occupied spaces when possible.
  - Set HVAC fans to the “on” position for all occupied area of the building; turn off any demand-controlled ventilation (DCV) controls that reduce air supply based on occupancy or temperature during occupied hours.
  - Open outdoor air dampers beyond minimum settings to reduce or eliminate HVAC air recirculation.
  - Ensure exhaust fans (restroom, kitchen) are functional and operating at full capacity when the building is occupied.
  - Consider portable high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) fan/filtration systems to help enhance air cleaning.
  - Generate clean-to-less-clean air movement by re-evaluating the positioning of supply and exhaust air diffusers and/or dampers.
  - Research also indicates care be taken to avoid seating persons in the direct stream of air flowing into or out of a room.

Please consult the complete CDC Guidelines for Ventilation in Building:  
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/ventilation.html>.

### **Outdoor Events**

The Hawai'i Conference office recommends holding in-person gatherings outdoors whenever possible. Outdoor gatherings still include mitigation strategies—masks and physical distancing as discussed above. Drive-in events are one form of outdoor gatherings, and also need to include masks and physical distance between vehicles, particularly when windows are open; the distance between vehicles provided by regular parking spaces is not sufficient to meet physical distance guidelines.

### **Inform Renters**

Share these guidelines with outside groups renting or wanting to rent your facility. Allow renters to use your building only if they follow your church's policies. Start with one organization at a time. Cap the total number of groups using the building in a way that prevents outside groups

from coming into contact with one another. Require each group to take responsibility for the space they are using (cleaning, set up, returning space to pre-use condition). Groups need to be told that if they do not agree to or do not follow your church policy, they will lose the privilege of renting/using your space. See <https://www.insuranceboard.org/preparing-your-church-property-after-lockdown/> for information on how to prepare buildings and grounds that have not been in use.

### **Working from Home**

Staff members experience unique and increased risks to COVID exposure because of the close contact required when performing their duties in person. This is amplified when individuals have pre-existing conditions placing them at higher risk for negative outcomes if they contract COVID19. The Hawai'i Conference office recommends that local churches make reasonable accommodations for staff members (including clergy) to work from home, even if your local church decides to resume in-person gatherings. If staff members are working in their offices, the Hawai'i Conference office recommends following the CDC Guidance for Businesses and Employers to maintain a safe working environment <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-business-response.html>.

### **Other Issues to Consider in Planning for the Resumption of Gathering In-Person**

- What staffing patterns do we need?
- Can we share staff with other congregations?
- How can we sustainably meet the demands of doing ministry in new ways?
- How can in-person and online worship both happen so that staff and volunteers are not burned out and find ministry life-giving rather than life-draining?
- Are we talking with all our stakeholders?
- What are our clergy and staff members saying about the sustainability of our ministry in an environment that will require a continued online presence while at the same time restarting in-person gatherings?
- What previous practices are obsolete or need to be adjusted?
- What can we let go of to create capacity for embracing new things?
- What were we paying for in our pre-pandemic ministry model? Do we still need to pay for each item, and if so, in the same or in a different way?
- What new things do we need to pay for?
- What new skills do we need to encourage our staff members to develop?
- How do current position descriptions match our needs moving forward? What needs to be adjusted?

The Insurance Board has a variety of resources <https://www.insuranceboard.org/safety-central/covid-19-resources/>.

The Hawai'i Conference office strongly recommends sharing guidelines and recommendations with church members and outside groups. The Conference staff is available as a conversation partner as you update your local church policy and protocols. You are not alone. Our covenant together means your church can tap into the thoughts, practices, and wisdom of leaders in 116 local churches and 5 associations communities. Our staff regularly holds space for conversations among covenant partners as we navigate these days.

**Prayer for Resuming In-Person Gatherings**

God of wholeness and healing, we worry about our future as a congregation because of the impact not being together in person has on our life in community. Fill us with your guidance and courage as we make decisions about how and when to resume hosting in-person church gatherings safely as possible. We pray for an end to this pandemic even as we acknowledge the part we play in the answer to our prayers. Protect the health and vitality of our members, our staff, and our neighbors. Thank you for your call to serve our communities in these times benevolently and with leadership. In your healing love we pray, Amen.

A large mahalo to the Southwest Conference, United Church of Christ, for the research they shared.