

COVID-19 Reopening Plan for St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all of our lives since March 2020 when churches were closed to prevent the spread of the virus. The St John Executive Committee and Church Council have been monitoring the recommendations made by government and health organizations over the last several months. The Iowa governor has gradually been relaxing the initial shutdown orders moving towards a reopening of the Iowa economy, including businesses and faith-based organizations. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has published several papers related to reopening for in-person worship. In an April 29, 2020 letter, the deans and chaplains of the conferences of the Northeastern Iowa Synod raised this issue, "even when we are allowed to worship together, we must ask is this the best decision for the sake of the neighbor and the common good?" Their recommendation was to continue online worship until such time as public health officials and science tell us that it is safe for us all. A similar message was issued April 28, 2020 by 21 denominational leaders in Iowa recommending refraining from in-person religious gatherings.

The St. John Lutheran Church Executive Committee, Council, and staff are committed to protecting the health and welfare of the members of our congregation. No matter what phase we are operating under, we ask that all members follow the recommendations of national, state, and local health officials, practicing social distancing, wearing masks, and proper hand hygiene (soap and water or 60%+ alcohol hand sanitizer). Be responsible. Do not attend or visit the church if you are feeling ill, have been exposed to someone with COVID-19, have a compromised immune system, or are at high risk of exposing others. The best way you can love your neighbor is to protect their health and yours.

If at any point in time a parishioner becomes ill with COVID-19 and has been in attendance at a small group or worship service, the parishioner is highly encouraged to contact Pastor Leeper or church office staff immediately in order that the church may assist with contact tracing and appropriate disease mitigation processes.

Previously, the Church Council had stated that there would be no in-person worship during the month of May. The intention was to reevaluate the COVID-19 situation and determine the best path forward.

The Executive Committee and Church Council have prepared a reopening plan that outlines what church activities are allowed as we progress further into the COVID-19 pandemic. This was based on reviewing current government and ELCA publications, health authority publications, and interviews with local health providers. It is a complicated situation with no easy answers. The Executive Committee or Church Council will determine the best practices in relation to congregational singing and celebration of the sacraments once in-person worship is again occurring either in an outdoor or indoor setting. The pastor is expected to follow these safety guidelines and phase gathering-size limits whether in the St. John building or at another location.

The Executive Committee and Church Council asks that the members of St. John please remain patient throughout the reopening process, keeping in mind this may take several weeks or months to work through. This is new territory for all of us and we are endeavoring to make the best decisions we can. Everyone is asked to remember that this is a plan which is subject to change in relation to the conditions that are being experienced in our area. As the people of St. John, we must be prepared to take a few steps forwards and possibly many steps backwards at any point in time. The Church Council is committed to regularly reviewing the reopening process and making scientific, fact-based decisions in conjunction with thorough moral deliberation that benefits the well-being of all the people of St. John and the greater Charles City community.

Phase I

After two consecutive weeks of 7-day average declining case counts of COVID-19 in the state of Iowa, or the percent testing positive cases in Iowa shows a 7-day average decline for two weeks, widespread testing is available to all those who require testing, and stable supplies of personal protective equipment are reported by public health agencies, St. John Lutheran Church may:

- Maintain worshiping through radio and internet services.
- Funerals and weddings may occur in the sanctuary should they be permitted by law (but will be encouraged to occur outdoors), these gatherings are limited to ten people or less in the entire facility.
- Persons participating in a funeral or wedding are required to certify verbally they are not experiencing any symptoms of COVID-19 as outlined by the CDC. They are required to verbally certify they have not been with anyone who is sick or experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 as outlined by the CDC.
- Do not attend or visit the church if you are feeling ill, have been exposed to COVID-19, have a compromised immune system, or are at high risk of exposing others. You are responsible for your own health and also that of your neighbor.
- A record of the people attending the funeral or wedding will be kept to help with contact tracing should one of the attendees become ill.
- Participants are to maintain proper social distancing of six feet or more.
- Participants are to wear a face mask at all times when in the building.
- Participants are to practice proper hand hygiene (soap and water or 60%+ alcohol hand sanitizer) immediately upon entry into the building.
- The church will be cleaned and sanitized after the event.
- The church office will continue to operate; however, the church building will remain locked to visitors. If a visitor is invited into the building, any people present must adhere to the guidelines above in relation to a funeral or wedding.
- If any visitor to the church becomes ill, they must inform the church so others who may have had contact with the visitor may monitor their own health.
- Church council and board meetings must occur electronically.
- All other St. John activities and meetings must occur electronically.

Phase II

If, after implementation of phase one, there continues to be a decline in 7-day average case counts of COVID-19 in the state of Iowa, or the percent testing positive cases in Iowa shows a 7-day average decline for three additional consecutive weeks, St. John Lutheran Church may:

- Continue worshiping through radio and internet services.
- Funeral and wedding guidelines remain unchanged from Phase I.
- Committees and small groups (ten people or less) will still be strongly encouraged to meet electronically.
- The St. John facility will remain closed.
- If conditions permit (and public gatherings greater than ten people are permitted by law), the St. John Church Council may authorize public, in-person worship through an outdoor setting.
- Parishioners participating in the outdoor worship setting would be required to follow all appropriate social distancing guidelines including, but not limited to, maintaining at least six feet of distance between members of different households, wearing a mask, and practicing proper hand hygiene (soap and water or 60%+ alcohol hand sanitizer).
- There will be no sharing of the peace, passing of an offering plate, or communion.
- Persons over the age of 65 or those who have other underlying health conditions are strongly encouraged to ponder their safety in relation to attending outdoor worship.

- Do not attend or visit the church if you are feeling ill, have been exposed to COVID-19, have a compromised immune system, or are at high risk of exposing others. You are responsible for your own health and also that of your neighbor.
- If at any point in time a parishioner becomes ill with COVID-19 and has been in attendance at a small group or worship service, the parishioner is highly encouraged to contact Pastor Leeper or church office staff immediately in order that the church may assist with contact tracing and appropriate disease mitigation processes.

Phase III

If, after implementation of phase two, there continues to be a decline in 7-day average case counts of COVID-19 in the state of Iowa, or the percent testing positive cases in Iowa shows a 7-day average decline for four additional consecutive weeks, St. John Lutheran Church may:

- Continue worshipping through radio and internet services.
- Begin (or continue) in-person outdoor worship if public gatherings greater than ten people are permitted by law.
- The St. John Church Council may elect to begin holding in-person worship in the St. John sanctuary if public gatherings greater than ten people are permitted by law observing the following conditions:
 - The sanctuary may hold a limited number of people (maximum of 40-50) in order to maintain social distancing guidelines.
 - Do not attend or visit the church if you are feeling ill, have been exposed to COVID-19, have a compromised immune system, or are at high risk of exposing others. You are responsible for your own health and also that of your neighbor.
 - If at any point in time a parishioner becomes ill with COVID-19 and has been in attendance at a small group or worship service, the parishioner is highly encouraged to contact Pastor Leeper or church office staff immediately in order that the church may assist with contact tracing and appropriate disease mitigation processes.
 - Persons over the age of 65 and persons with underlying health conditions will be strongly encouraged to ponder their safety in relation to attending worship in person and are encouraged to remain at home and worship via electronic means.
 - A reservation system will be devised to facilitate in-person worship capacity.
 - Assigned seating may be necessary to maintain social distancing guidelines. You will likely not be able to sit in your usual spot. Please be flexible with this new seating arrangement.
 - Observing proper social distancing practices (i.e. maintain six feet between persons of different households), wearing a mask, and observing proper hand hygiene upon entering the building (soap and water or 60%+ alcohol hand sanitizer).
 - Please follow any directions given by church staff, ushers, or written notices when entering the church. There may be specific directions for movement in the church once you enter to minimize potential exposures and maintain social distancing.
 - Parishioners will be seated and dismissed by ushers to help in maintaining social distancing.
 - The service will likely be different than what we were doing before COVID-19. Please be understanding and patient of how the service is adapted to address COVID-19 concerns.
 - There will be no sharing of the peace, passing of an offering plate, or communion.
 - There will be no social/coffee hour following worship.
 - Based on ELCA recommendations, singing may not be allowed.
 - All worship materials will be provided electronically and made available upon the projection screen (hymnals will be removed; *parishioners are encouraged to bring their own hymnal if they so desire; parishioners will have an opportunity to "check out" a hymnal*).
- The same guidelines as above would be in place for any kind of worship, including, but not limited to a wedding or funeral (post-funeral luncheons will not be permitted).

- If multiple services are held, the sanctuary will be cleaned and sanitized between services. Please allow church staff the time and space to complete this cleaning.
- The church office will be open for appointments (the building will remain closed; no in-person activities).
- Groups of St. John will continue to be encouraged to meet via electronic means.

Phase IV

If, after implementation of phase three, there continues to be a decline in 7-day average case counts of COVID-19 in the state of Iowa, or the percent testing positive cases in Iowa shows a 7-day average decline for four additional consecutive weeks, St. John Lutheran Church may:

- Authorize a return to full in-person worship if public gatherings of 50 or more people are allowed.
- Continue worshiping through radio and internet services.
- Persons over the age of 65 or those who have other underlying health conditions are strongly encouraged to ponder their safety in relation to attending worship.
- Be responsible. Do not attend or visit the church if you are feeling ill, have been exposed to COVID-19, have a compromised immune system, or are at high risk of exposing others. You are responsible for your own health and also that of your neighbor.
- If at any point in time a parishioner becomes ill with COVID-19 and has been in attendance at a small group or worship service, the parishioner is highly encouraged to contact Pastor Leeper or church office staff immediately in order that the church may assist with contact tracing and appropriate disease mitigation processes.
- Require appropriate public health disease prevention and mitigation measures as prescribed by public health authorities.
- Permit groups to meet in-person as deemed necessary and resume in-person educational endeavors as necessary.
- Decisions regarding singing, use of hymnals, use of bulletins, or congregational responses will be determined and announced.