

10/15/20

To: Members of the St. Thomas Lutheran Church Council

From: The St. Thomas Re-opening Task Force

Re: Revised Re-opening Proposal

In the past few weeks, certain factors have led the task force to review its original proposal to the council. After much discussion the task force decided to submit a revised re-opening proposal. At the time the task force began meeting St. Thomas was already in its own self-defined Phase 1--church was completely closed except for essential staff. This revised proposal includes changes that we think more accurately represent current practices at St. Thomas.

The task force originally did not consider altering Phase 1 and used it as our starting point. That has proved to be problematic. In practice, persons other than essential staff have been entering the building both as individuals and in some cases as small groups. In most cases it was necessary for them to do so. But because the church is not officially acknowledging such and is still operating as if no one is coming into the church, protocols are not in place to address this reality.

Additionally, being absolutely closed except for staff did not recognize the fact that even the state and federal guidelines as well as I-K Synod did allow in their Phase 1 for individuals and small groups of no more than 10 people to meet at church at the discretion of staff and following strict safety protocols. In reality, St. Thomas' Phase 1 was more strict than government and I-K Synod guidelines required.

The task force now recommends that Phase 1 be altered to allow, at the discretion of the staff, individuals and small groups of 10 or fewer people to meet at church. This will better reflect the reality of St. Thomas at this time. This will require that the staff put together the necessary protocols to safely support this change. The task force believes this is much better than having people unofficially coming and going in the absence of such protocols. Also it recognizes that there are circumstances where for any number of reasons people need to be in the church and we want them there under the safest possible circumstances.

So this revised proposal includes the changes that the task force believes improve the St. Thomas re-opening plan for Phases 1 and 2. It also includes a description of and the guidelines for moving into Phase 3. Please remember that these are not meant to be overly prescriptive but rather to provide guidance as the church moves forward toward re-opening the building.

ST. THOMAS RE-OPENING TASK FORCE

St. Thomas Lutheran Church Re-opening Task Force Recommendations to Council

I. Background

The St. Thomas Re-opening Task Force was formed by the executive council and met for the first time on May 20, 2020. Since that date the task force has spent considerable time reviewing and discussing relevant documents from the I-K Synod Office, Indiana State Department of Health (ISDH), and the CDC regarding the issue of church re-openings. The task force has attempted to stay abreast of the latest medical findings as reported in various journals and news outlets as well as through communication with local health officials. The task force, in consultation with HVAC professionals, has conducted air-flow studies and explored installing air purification systems at St. Thomas. Based upon the research and discussion the task force members unanimously agreed that there is much for the St. Thomas Council to consider in preparation for re-opening the church.

On May 28 the task force proposed to Council that St. Thomas adopt a phased approach to the resumption of activities at St. Thomas. It proposed that St. Thomas gradually resume activities through three distinct phases. In general, the church is closed in Phase 1, however, at the discretion of the staff, individuals and small groups of no more than 10 people may meet following strict protocols. St. Thomas is currently in Phase 1. Phase 2 would allow for group gatherings such as committees, Bible studies, prayer groups, etc. that might involve more than 10 people with appropriate safety protocols in place. Phase 3 would include near normal church activities including in-person worship with strong safety protocols in place. The task force also recommends that St. Thomas continue its innovative virtual services and activities not only during Phase 1 but throughout all phases going forward.

The task force decision-making has been informed by our commitment to significant guiding values. These values include health & safety, phasing, and effectiveness. We value the health of our congregation and staff, the wellbeing of our community, and risks to vulnerable populations in our re-opening decisions. We will re-introduce the ministries of St. Thomas through gradual phases evaluating the success of each phase before moving to the next. We want to use this opportunity to improve the effectiveness of St. Thomas' ministries through continued innovation as well as a return to its traditional approaches. These are all important values and must be held in balance when making decisions regarding the re-opening of the building.

II. Considerations for Re-opening in Phase 1 and Phase 2

Phase 1

In general, the church building is closed to all but staff members.

At the discretion of the staff, individuals and small groups of not more than 10 people may meet at church following all safety protocols.

Worship services are conducted virtually but may be recorded in the sanctuary following physical distancing guidelines

Church committees will continue virtual meetings

Individuals can schedule to use the sanctuary for prayer following physical distancing and safety protocols

Meetings and other activities are encouraged to occur outside, weather permitting, following physical distancing and other safety protocols

People who have been ill, have compromised immune systems, have been exposed to COVID-19, or who are at high risk should seriously consider not attending in-person activities at church. High-risk individuals including staff should continue to shelter in place

Phase 2

Church building is open.

Church re-opens for committees, groups and activities involving more than 10 people. Room and sanctuary capacity limits must be followed.

Continue virtual worship services

Larger groups, committees, etc. can continue virtual meetings with the option to begin having such meetings at church following all safety protocols; such meetings must allow for members to participate virtually

Funerals, weddings, etc. can be held following all safety and capacity limit guidelines.

People who have been ill, have compromised immune systems, have been exposed to COVID-19, or who are at high risk should seriously consider not

attending in-person activities at church. High-risk individuals including staff should continue to shelter in place

Recommendations

The following four recommendations are presented to the St. Thomas Council to provide guidance as it plans the phased re-opening plan for the church building.

Recommendation 1: The task force recommends that the pastor and executive council utilize the Indiana State Health Department COVID-19 Dashboard to determine when to move forward from Phase 1 to Phase 2.

The ISDH Dashboard provides a weekly score, correlated to the colors red, orange, yellow, and blue, of all counties in Indiana. The weekly score is an average of points assigned for the county's 7-day positivity rate and weekly cases per 100,000 people. It is updated at noon on Wednesdays. The task force recommends that St. Thomas' Phase 2 be correlated as blue, or scoring 0.5 or 0. This also means if Monroe County moves from blue to yellow, orange, or red then St. Thomas should automatically revert to Phase 1. This dashboard may be accessed by anyone at <https://www.coronavirus.in.gov/2393.htm>.

Recommendation 2: St. Thomas must provide the necessary infrastructure to support the health and safety protocols that need to be established. The following is a recommended list of activities to be completed and protocols to be established for re-opening the building

Protocols for facility use:

All persons must check in at the office upon entering the church. Names and contact information will be recorded. The office will provide masks, if needed, and sanitizer to all people who enter the church. Masks must be worn properly by all persons who enter the church unless health or age (2 or younger) do not allow.

Meetings must be scheduled ahead of time, rooms assigned based on capacity limits, and rosters of who attended turned in to the office.

In order to include those might not feel comfortable meeting in person, small groups are encouraged to utilize technology for hybrid meetings involving people meeting in person, at St. Thomas, and those joining the meeting from their homes.

Meeting chairs will be responsible for making sure that the room is left as required by guidelines.

Furniture will be arranged to support physical distancing and capacity limits

Protocols for bathroom use (sanitizers, physical distancing) will be posted in each bathroom.

Clear routes for movement from entrance to sanctuary that allow for physical distancing will be mapped and posted.

Signage promoting good hygiene, physical distancing, and church re-opening policies and procedures will be posted at the entrance and other relevant areas.

Areas of the church that will not be used will be closed.

Activities to be completed by staff and council:

Follow all guidelines for cleaning and disinfecting all areas prior to people returning

Implement all safety and cleaning protocols

Assess equipment and supply needs to support health and safety protocols (hand sanitizer, masks, disinfectants, etc.)

Assess the additional time demands and work required of staff; create plan to address them

Set HVAC to optimize and balance airflow into the church meeting and office spaces.

Assess insurance and liability concerns

Arrange for training of staff, clergy and lay leaders on safety protocols and procedures

Communicate new re-opening procedures and protocols to the congregation and explain how they are designed to provide a safe and healthy environment for returning to in-person church activities

In consultation with local health officials, develop procedures for handling a situation where someone becomes sick at church and for notifying the

appropriate persons or entities if a person diagnosed with COVID-19 has been in the church.

Recommendation 3: It is the recommendation of the task force that subcommittees should be formed comprised of task force members, members of the council and church standing committees. These subcommittees will be responsible for developing the specific protocols and completing the specific activities as listed previously in this proposal. Note: Some activities may already have been completed.

Debbie Selk, Staff, and Property Committee

- Follow all guidelines for cleaning and disinfecting all areas prior to people returning
- Implement all safety and cleaning protocols
- Furniture will be arranged to support physical distancing and capacity limits
- Develop and posting bathroom protocols
- Mapping and posting signage to manage traffic flow that allows for physical distancing
- Assess equipment and supply needs to support health and safety protocols (hand sanitizer, masks, disinfectant, etc.)
- Set the HVAC to optimize and balance airflow into the church meeting and office spaces
- Determine and close off areas of the church that will not be used

Susan Krieg, Mike Powell, Pastor Adrienne Meier

- Develop office protocols, sign in and scheduling procedures
- Create a one-page document explaining the expectations of building use during COVID 19 that will be sent to all who wish to use the building and also will be available in the office upon signing in
- Develop and post signage promoting good hygiene, physical distancing, and church re-opening procedures
- Develop procedures for distributing masks and sanitizer

Gretchen Moehlmann and Education Committee

- Develop plan for education programs (virtual and/or in person)
- Work with staff and education committee to develop protocols
- * Contact families with education program safety protocols

Pastor Adrienne Meier, Mike Powell, Worship Committee and Altar Guild

- Develop worship protocols and practices for Phase 3
- Continue the planning and delivery of virtual worship and virtual pastoral care

Pastor Adrienne Meier, Executive Council, and Council

- Arrange for training of staff, clergy, and lay leaders on safety protocols and procedures
- Communicate new re-opening procedures and protocols to the congregation and explain how they are designed to provide a safe and healthy environment for returning to in-person church activities
- In consultation with local health officials, develop procedures for handling a situation where someone becomes sick at church and for notifying the appropriate persons or entities if a person diagnosed with COVID-19 has been in the church
- Assess insurance and liability concerns
- Assess progress and determine the appropriate time for St. Thomas to move forward between phases and, if necessary, whether to return to a previous phase.

Recommendation 4: The task force recommends that the council determine how and who should determine when is an appropriate time for the church to move from one phase to another.

It is important that those responsible for making such important decisions be clearly identified and empowered to make such decisions. The task force believes that the pastor and executive council, as the church leadership team, are in a position to make expedient decisions in returning to prior phases and for moving from Phase 1 to Phase 2. Further, the council should involve as many stakeholders as possible in making the decision to move to Phase 3.

III. Considerations for Returning to In-person Worship at St. Thomas Lutheran Church in Phase 3

“As we begin to consider returning to in-person gatherings for worship across the territory of the Indiana-Kentucky Synod, it is crucial that we plan together and with intentionality, taking into consideration a wide range of medical, scientific, theological, and pastoral dimensions and implications for our gatherings. It is also clear that for most faith communities gathering in-person for worship and other activities will need to be done in stages and will be very different from gatherings before we entered the coronavirus wilderness.” *Guidelines for Gathering In-Person*, I-K Synod, ELCA

This document, prepared by the St. Thomas re-opening task force, is designed to provide the staff, council, committees, ministries, and worship community guidelines for entering Phase 3 of its re-opening plan. Phase 3 signifies a return to near normal activities for St. Thomas including in-person events and worship

services. As with Phases 1 and 2, these guidelines are based on information provided by the I-K Synod, CDC, and the Indiana State Department of Health (ISDH).

Be mindful that the “phased” approach that St. Thomas has adopted will likely not be a linear one; there may be times of gradual reopening as infections decrease, followed by restrictions if new waves of infections emerge. **Before entering into Phase 3 as described here, it is assumed that the Phase 2 re-opening has been successful.**

In all situations, we will want to err on the side of love for our neighbor and know that change will be inevitable. Patience, grace, and flexibility will be necessary as we strive to make the most appropriate decisions for the people of St. Thomas at this time.

Important: We will need to think about how to include those who cannot or should not come to worship during the phasing in of in-person worship at St. Thomas, especially those who are considered to be at-risk. For St. Thomas that represents a significant number of members. At the very least it may mean the long-term continuation of virtual worship services.

Phase 3

The following information includes suggestions for consideration as St. Thomas re-introduces in-person worship services. It is not an exhaustive list and it is not prescriptive either. It includes ideas from the I-K Synod, CDC and ISDH and should provide St. Thomas with guidance on how to safely and effectively offer its own in-person worship services. The relevant committees such as Worship and other groups should use these to inform their own decision-making. The guidelines have been organized around the different aspects of in-person worship.

A. How many services?

One of the most important decisions St. Thomas will have to make upon entering Phase 3 will be to determine how many worship services to have on Sunday as well as any other chosen day/night. This is to insure that room capacity is not exceeded during any given service. This will impact cleaning protocols and how hymnals, Bibles, bulletins and children’s bags are used.

B. Preparation

Do not provide nursery (childcare or children’s Sunday School) at least until schools re-open.

Remove materials from the worship and gathering spaces such as pens, information cards, welcome pads, etc. that are traditionally passed from person to person during the service.

Worship bags for children will be available, but limited to one bag per child each worship service. After the service, each bag should be dropped off in a bin and not used again until the following Sunday or other day of worship. This will provide appropriate time between handlings.

Bulletins should be for one-time use only. If possible, pre-place bulletins in the sections where seating is allowed. This will provide another visual cue for physical distancing.

Provide hand sanitizer at all entrances and in the seating areas. Masks should be provided as needed by ushers or greeters.

Clean and disinfect high-touch surfaces. Overall cleaning and disinfection should happen at regular intervals, especially after and between worship/events. This includes door handles, light switches, tabletops, chairs, etc.

Reasonable and safe bathroom protocols that help maintain sanitary conditions should be established and posted.

C. Gathering/Physical Distancing

Determine the maximum room capacity for the sanctuary. Offer multiple services with fewer attendees as needed.

Encourage people to sign up for worship services in advance, up to a set number, while still allowing for a few new people to drop in. This will be helpful in maintaining a record of who was physically present in the event a case is identified and assistance is needed with contact tracing.

Make preparations and plans for reorganizing seating as necessary. Cluster chairs or use tape to close off rows in order to guide worshipers to sit at least six feet from each other, such as every third row. This does not

apply to family members in a single household.

Maintain a minimum of 6 feet distance between individual worshipers and individual family units of the same households at all times. Signs should remind people of the need to maintain proper distance. Limit people's movement in worship to reduce their occupying of the same air space and the likelihood of inadvertent close contact. This may prove difficult during the procession.

Consider how ushers and greeters will guide those entering and exiting in new ways that maintain proper physical distancing. They should not shake hands or hand out bulletins. They should also be prepared for addressing folks who arrive after the room capacity has been met or who do not have a face covering. Greeters and ushers will need to be among those who encourage others to honor physical distancing.

If there are multiple services, schedule services with enough time in between to ensure that appropriate distancing can be observed between those leaving and arriving and for sanitizing spaces.

Hymnals and other worship books should not be used during more than one service on a given day. If there are multiple services on a day then those that were used should be collected between services and new ones put out to replace them. Members should be encouraged to bring their own.

During announcements consider thanking people for coming, and politely instructing them to observe proper sanitation and hygiene practices while together, including shaking hands and hugging, as difficult as that may be.

D. Worship Practices

1. Speaking, Singing, and Playing Instruments in Worship

Initially singing should be prohibited. Singing together, even from a distance, is one of the riskiest behaviors due to the spread of aerosols that can carry the virus a significant distance and remain suspended in the air.

Similar caution applies to unison speaking, such as reciting the Lord's Prayer and other communal speech.

Like singing, playing a wind instrument initiates a spread of aerosols and droplets and poses a strong risk of infection.

Feature instrumental music and find other ways for worshipers to participate: for instance, clapping, moving in rhythm, or using small percussion instruments.

When and where it is safe to do so, feature music from soloists or small ensembles, with the congregation praying through attentive listening.

2. Offering, Sharing the Peace, Dismissal

Refrain from passing a collection plate or basket during the offering; have stations where people can place offerings when they leave and/or provide them with online giving options.

Provide alternate methods of sharing the peace outside of family households. These could include the exchange of words, waves, offering a reverent bow, or using American Sign Language.

Avoid "receiving lines" at the door before and after worship. Physical distance should be maintained as people leave the worship space and in the narthex. Face coverings should be worn until they have left the building.

There should be no sharing of food, including coffee hours, potlucks, or other typical forms of food-based fellowship before or after worship.

3. Holy Baptism

For those who wish to remember their baptism by touching the water in the baptismal font, provide hand sanitizer for use before placing their hands in the water .

Sanitize the font and fill it with fresh water before a baptism.

4. Holy Communion

The distribution of communion elements in sanitary, hygienically appropriate ways may well be the most challenging and complicated aspect of worshiping in person.

Those preparing and serving communion should sanitize their hands immediately before distributing communion; doing so in view of the congregation may help in reducing anxiety.

During the Great Thanksgiving, the presiding minister may stand back from the table and not further touch the bread and cup. Congregations should refrain from kneeling or standing close together at a communion rail or in a line. It is recommended that St. Thomas develop a plan for the distribution of the elements that minimizes the amount of movement by worshipers.

Wafers may be a safer option than bread during this time. A package of wafers can be emptied onto a paten with minimal touch. Bread requires more handling. Common cup and intinction are not recommended.

If distributing wine in small glasses in trays, ensure that the glasses are spaced far enough apart to minimize people's touching of other glasses.

Communion in one kind may be encouraged. Lutheran theology reminds us that communing in one kind is acceptable and appropriate. A chalice may also be filled with a minimal amount of wine, and communicants could reverence the cup while not partaking of the wine, still hearing the words "the blood of Christ, shed for you."

Communion assistants should commune last.

5. Worship Leadership

Worship leaders may not need to wear masks if they are over six feet away. Leaders may still choose to wear masks and should if they come into closer proximity with others.

Preachers and presiders must be mindful of physical distancing when speaking, especially because leaders need to project their voices. Speakers and preachers may remove face coverings while speaking only if they are 10 feet or more from others.

Leaders should refrain from greeting worshipers at the door before or after worship.

Congregational leaders need to know how many people their worship space can hold if they are worshipping in family groups and sitting six feet apart, and should manage movement into and out of the building and worship space.

Be mindful of the workload of leaders if they begin to offer multiple worship services both online and in-person, as this will require additional preparation and time. Janitorial staff will have to do more frequent cleaning. Additional compensation and/or support may have to be considered .

Prayerfully submitted,

Frank Nierzwicki (chair), Susan Krieg, Pastor Adrienne Meier, Gretchen Moehlmann, Mike Powell, Debbie Selk, Bruce Colston

