



# FOREST HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

7495 Cascade Rd., Grand Rapids, MI 49546 616.942.2751 fax 616.942.4549 [www.fhpcusa.org](http://www.fhpcusa.org)

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Dear Forest Hills Presbyterian Members and Friends,

It is hard to believe that it has been seven months since we last gathered in person. It has been a trying time, not being together at the church for worship, education, mission and fellowship. It has been difficult not to be able to gather for weddings and funerals. And yet, we have continued to *be the church!* We have gathered remotely to worship together online, spent time in fellowship on Zoom, and stayed in touch through e-mails, Facebook, and phone calls. Through this difficult time, we are grateful for the technologies that have helped to keep our church family together – and grateful for all of you who stood by one another in Christ to love and support your church family.

We want to be together in person soon but know that we must continue to take efforts to prevent a new wave of infections. We initially hoped for a quick return to in-person gatherings. As more churches open, there are reports of virus outbreaks within these congregations, even locally. We now recognize that returning to church will happen more slowly than we had hoped and in phases. The way forward will not be a matter of following a timetable, but of faithfully discerning the progress of the pandemic and responding accordingly.

To recommend how to gradually reopen the building while keeping in mind the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of our members and friends, a COVID Task Force was appointed in July. Keeping our church family safe is our top priority but we must also meet our spiritual and emotional needs to grow our faith. For the foreseeable future, we will continue to make difficult choices and work to balance these two. We believe that the phased re-opening approach we have developed will serve towards that end. In October, the Session approved the plan outlined below.

With this plan, we are happy to welcome people back into our church building! Currently in Phase 2, we are allowing small groups into the building in numbers of 10 people or less with social distancing and mask guidelines being followed. This means that some committees can now meet at the church in designated parts of the building to ensure that proper cleaning protocols can be applied. It also means that our fall small group series, *What Makes You Happy*, will have some in person options. We are excited for these opportunities to once again spend time in fellowship, service, and prayer together.

With our return to the building, there will be many practices put into place for meetings, worship, and fellowship. First and foremost, there will be new things we all must do to ensure each other's safety and the plan outlines some of these. These practices will not only protect our congregation, but also our church staff, who will undoubtedly be exposed to more people due to the nature of their roles.

Additionally, as we approach a time when we can worship together in person in Phase 3, we recognize that there will be an increased need for volunteers on Sunday mornings. For those who feel ready to return to the church building at that time, we may call upon you to volunteer as ushers, security, greeters, or to work the A/V room or check-in desk. We expect that some who would typically be happy to volunteer may not yet feel comfortable returning to group worship. Thus, the demand on our willing and able volunteer network will be great but we have faith that those who can, will!

With the attached plan, we hope you will gain a sense of how we plan to reintegrate our worship and activities back into the building. We know that there will be questions and opportunities for discussion. If you would like to share your thoughts, please use the online form noted here and one of our task force members will reach out to you. We welcome your feedback at this address: [www.fhpcusa.org/covidresponse](http://www.fhpcusa.org/covidresponse)

We will continue to communicate with you as the plan and recommendations change. In the meantime, we pray for a spirit of discernment, for wisdom, and patience. We pray for the scientists and medical professionals, for the ill and recovering, and for those grieving and struggling with these challenging times. In the midst of so many unknowns, we affirm that nothing can separate us from the love of God in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Faithfully,

COVID Task Force Members

Jace Andrus

Reggie Harris

Jan Pietrzyk

Al Rossi

Ashley Atkins

Bruce Kutsche

Jim Pollard

Zach Taylor

Colleen Carkeet

Peta-Gay Nolan

Ben Powell

# Plan for Returning to the Church Building

## Forest Hills Presbyterian Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan

### Developing the Plan for Returning to the Church Building

The primary concern of the task force is the ongoing safety of our church family and our community. We will continue to follow the guidance of the State of Michigan, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and the Presbytery of Lake Michigan. We will always err on the side of safety and caution when faced with multiple guidelines.

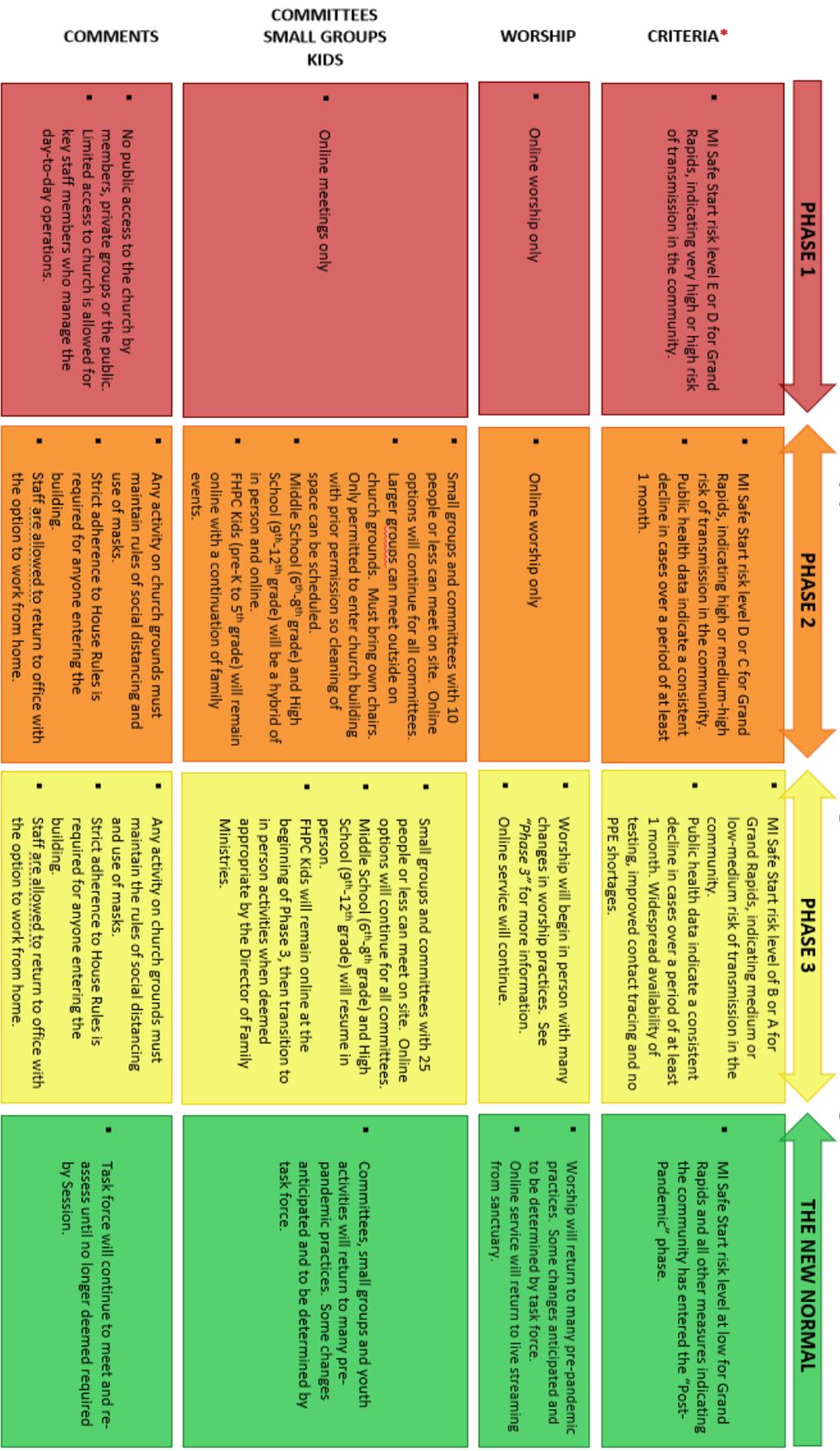
Churches are unique because being “open” for us is different than for a store or other business. We have large groups of people that come into the building, sit closely together to talk, and spend 1-3 hours in a room at a time. **Churches continue to be a place that is at high risk to spread the virus.** Opening the building means being able to handle the volume of cleaning needed, following social distancing protocols, and providing masks and sanitizer for all who need it. We know this means reopening the building in multiple stages.

As a task force, we feel a responsibility to find a way to bring our congregation together while protecting the safety of our members, guests, pastor, ministry directors, worship leaders and the many volunteers that will be required to open the building. Here are some of the questions we have been asking as we evaluate what each stage of reopening looks like:

- How will we maintain social distance while entering and exiting the building, worshipping, and greeting one another?
- In early phases of reopening, how will we cap attendance at events so that members of the community can participate without exceeding the guidelines?
- How many people can our worship space hold if we are worshipping in household units sitting 6 feet apart?
- How will we ensure sanitation and disinfection for communal spaces? This includes worship bulletins, hymnals, areas where small groups meet, nursery and church school classrooms, pews and chairs, doorknobs, bathrooms, kitchen, other areas that people touch. Is there ample access to additional cleaning supplies?
- What safety precautions such as masks, sanitizer, and cleaning supplies do we need to provide? Who is responsible for maintaining the supply of these and how do we ensure their use is enforced?
- What safety precautions are specifically applicable for children? When might we be able to reopen the nursery?
- If someone tests positive for COVID-19, how will we communicate with our congregation and guests who may have had contact with that individual while maintaining privacy and pastoral care?

FIGURE 1

## Phased Approach for Returning to Church Building



**\*The criteria outlined for phases uses guidance established by public health officials, the State of Michigan, and the presbytery. A recommendation of readiness to move up or down between phases will be made by the task force and final determination voted upon by Session.**

## Phased Approach to Reopening the Building

The task force has established a plan for reopening the church building in phases, summarized in **Figure 1**. This plan was developed using guidance established by public health officials, the State of Michigan, and the presbytery. For each phase of reopening the building, the task force will use the established criteria as *guidelines* to consider. A recommendation of readiness to move up or down between phases will be made by the task force and final determination voted upon by Session.

**The timeline for moving between phases may not be linear.** Due to local changes in recommendations and public health risk, there might be times when we return to earlier, stricter, phases before moving forward for a second or third time. We need to be flexible in adapting to the guidelines and we will continue to clearly communicate how to participate in church ministry every step of the way.

**Current Status: We are in Phase Two.**

### Phase One

Phase One is the status that described our operations at the height of the pandemic. This is reflected in the Grand Rapids area being designated a MI Safe Start risk level of E or D, indicating a very high or high risk of virus transmission in the community.

Phase One includes:

1. Worship, committees and programs will operate online.
2. Limited access to the church building and grounds for key staff members who manage the day to day operations. For staff who must be on site, they are required to maintain social distancing, wear masks and disinfect surfaces per CDC guidelines.
3. No public access to the church building or grounds by members, private groups or the public.

The White House and CDC have published guidelines for when phased re-opening for any operational facility should begin, outlined in **Figure 2**. These will be followed in the case that another peak in Grand Rapids forces us back to Phase One.

FIGURE 2  
**When to Start Phasing In**

<i>Satisfy Before Proceeding to Phased Comeback</i>		
SYMPTOMS	CASES	HOSPITALS
Downward trajectory of influenza-like illnesses (ILI) reported within a 14-day period  AND  Downward trajectory of COVID-like syndromic cases reported within a 14-day period	Downward trajectory of documented cases within a 14-day period  OR  Downward trajectory of positive tests as a percent of total tests within a 14-day period (flat or increasing volume of tests)	Treat all patients without crisis care  AND  Robust testing program in place for at-risk healthcare workers, including emerging antibody testing

Source: *Guidelines for Opening Up America* <https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/>

## Phase Two

In addition to meeting the White House and CDC requirements to begin phasing in (**Figure 2**), Phase Two has criteria that the Grand Rapids area be designated a MI Safe Start risk level of D or C, indicating a high or medium-high risk of virus transmission in the community. Public health data must also indicate a consistent decline in cases in this area over a period of at least one month. When these criteria are met, the task force will request approval of Session to proceed to Phase Two.

Phase Two includes:

1. Worship and most programs remain online.
2. Staff are allowed to return to the office with the option to work from home. For staff who choose to be on site, they are required to maintain social distancing, wear masks and disinfect surfaces per CDC guidelines.
3. Small groups and small committees (10 people or less) can meet in person with strict adherence to the house rules (see *House Rules* below). They must obtain prior permission from church administrative staff and will be restricted in which rooms they can use so that proper cleaning protocols can be activated in those areas. Online options will continue to be provided for all committees.
4. Larger groups can meet outside on the church grounds but must bring their own chairs and maintain social distancing. They are only permitted to enter the church building with prior permission so that adequate cleaning of bathrooms and other impacted spaces can be scheduled.
5. Middle School (6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade) and High School (9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade) activities will be a hybrid of online and in person. Any activities in the church building will involve strict

adherence to the house rules (see *House Rules* below) and will be in restricted rooms so that proper cleaning protocols can be activated in those areas.

6. FHPC Kids (pre-K to 5<sup>th</sup> grade) will remain online with a continuation of family events.

### **Phase Three**

Phase Three has criteria that the Grand Rapids area be designated a MI Safe Start risk level of B or A, indicating a medium or low-medium risk of virus transmission in the community. Public health data must also indicate a consistent decline in cases in this area over a period of at least one month. There must be widespread availability of testing, improved contact tracing, and no shortages in Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). When these criteria are met the task force will request approval of Session to proceed to Phase Three.

Phase Three will include:

1. Worship will begin in person (with an ongoing online option).
2. Staff will continue to have the option to work from home.
3. Small groups and committees of 25 people or less can meet in person (with an ongoing online option).
4. Sunday morning adult classes can resume by practicing social distancing, limiting the class size, and wearing masks. We will also have online options.
5. FHPC Kids will remain online at the beginning of Phase 3 to allow our staff to focus on a smooth transition to bringing the congregation back into church. FHPC Kids will then gradually transition to in person activities when deemed appropriate by the Director of Family Ministries.

To limit personal contact there will be changes in many of our worship practices. This includes:

- There will be a limit to the number of people who can attend in person to allow for social distancing. An online sign-up will be used to monitor this, as well as assist with contact tracing should the need arise. Volunteers will check-off attendees upon arrival.
- Seating will be limited to specific pews and directed by ushers to ensure social distancing. Groups larger than 4 people may not be able to sit together.
- All communal items will be removed from the sanctuary including Bibles, sign-in pads, hymnals, offering envelopes, etc. The offering plate will not be passed and will be replaced by offering boxes at the doors to the sanctuary.
- There will be no music or singing during the church service. This includes singing by the congregation, the band, the choir, or special performances by children or guests.
- There will be no fellowship before or after service. Coffee and cookies will not be served.
- Parts of the church building will be closed to limit congregating and the number of surfaces that must be sanitized. This includes the fellowship hall, kitchen, coffee

lounge and coat closet. Coats can be brought into the sanctuary and placed in the pews.

- The nurse's station will not be open.
- Members will be asked to take nametags home to limit the risk of cross-contamination.
- All who enter the building must strictly adhere to the house rules (see *House Rules* below).

All practices noted above will be continuously re-evaluated based on the public health situation. We are excited about being able to sing and have fellowship together and each of these and other pre-COVID practices will be adapted or added back to our worship time when it is safe to do so. These aspects of the service could be added mid-phase if deemed appropriate.

## House Rules

In order to keep everyone safe, we have developed a list of house rules that will need to be followed until further notice by all who enter the church building. We will ask those who are not willing to abide by these guidelines to leave the building. The house rules are:

- If you are feeling ill, do not enter the building.
- Use hand sanitizer after entering the building.
- Wear masks at all times while in the building.
- Do not shake hands or have physical contact with anyone outside of your family unit.
- Maintain social distance between family units.
- Limit the number of surfaces you touch.
- No singing while in the building.
- Avoid congregating in the building or outside by the doorways.
- Groups cannot meet in the church when preschool is in the building.
- For any groups using the building, they must reserve the space with the FHPC office and use the prescribed cleaning protocol following the meeting.
- There will be no food or beverage preparation allowed on site.
- Alert the church if you are exposed to COVID-19 or test positive.

The house rules will be continuously reviewed and updated as the public health situation evolves and as more is known about virus transmission. We will communicate these changes as they are put into effect.

## **Additional Considerations**

### **Online Worship**

It has become abundantly clear that having FHPC's worship services available online is a ministry of accessibility and outreach. We are committed to continuing to offer an online worship option in an ongoing manner. Once we leave Phase 3 and enter "the new normal," the online service will transition back to live streaming from the sanctuary.

### **Weddings and Funerals**

We will evaluate how we conduct weddings and funerals as the need arises depending on the safety recommendations of the moment. We will work with families to create a plan that honors their loved one, honors their grieving process, and keeps everyone safe. There will be a requirement for any services in the church building that everyone must wear masks and strictly adhere to the house rules (see *House Rules* above). We have ideas and wisdom about how to have online memorial services or visitation should a family not wish to postpone their service.

### **Elections**

We will continue to be a polling place for Forest Hills. We will contact the local election officials to ensure they are following the CDC guidelines for elections. We will ask that all poll workers and voters remain on the main level. We will also have our cleaners sanitize the building after each election day.

### **Preschool**

The Forest Hills Presbyterian Preschool will follow the common calendar of the Kent Intermediate School District and Forest Hills Public Schools. They will follow the health guidance of the Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs and the Kent County Health Department.

### **Special Events and Meetings Not Noted in Plan**

If an FHPC group has the need to use the church building for a meeting or activity not noted in the plan, this may be individually approved by church administrative staff. The group will be limited to the number of participants defined in the current phase with strict adherence to the house rules (see *House Rules*). A specific room assignment will also be made so that proper cleaning protocols can be activated in those areas. Please contact the church office if there is interest in this.

## **Looking Ahead Long Term – The New Normal**

Although there is still a lot about the future we do not know, we believe we can anticipate these things:

- There will be some continued change that feels like a loss and some that feels like an opportunity. Many of us will grieve the changes in our rituals and gatherings. It is also okay to look for the ways our creativity is drawing us into new, more accessible, farther reaching ministries.
- We are in this together, and there will surely be a wide range of feelings that we are all processing. We will continue to create space for us to share and process our experiences together.
- Our staff and church leadership are prepared and poised to take on these new challenges. They have been working together for the past seven months to ensure the safety of our congregation and to bring FHPC's ministry to life in new ways.
- With the help of God, may our church continue to be a beloved community, a source of hope, love and compassion.