

## Going Back to Church: Three Most Important Practices to Keep us Safe

COVID-19, also known as SARS-CoV-2, has dominated the news and impacted our lives for many months. It now appears that disappearance of this virus from our everyday routines will be slow, occurring over several months. Observations of what impacts our safety exist in the scientific literature, and also the news media. We have all heard that attending Church in person can increase the chance of getting sick from this virus. **In order to minimize this risk**, there are three main things to focus on when we start worshipping together in the Church building:

- 1) maintain physical distancing from others who are not living with us – stay 6 feet away from them,
- 2) wear a face covering (a cloth mask over the nose and mouth is fine), and
- 3) make sure there is good ventilation in the room where we are seated for fellowship or worship – either by having optimized air handling in the building or opening windows.

Other things are important too, like frequently cleaning our hands, making sure the things we often touch are sanitized, and not passing anything to one another – however, following the three practices first mentioned will offer the greatest opportunity for all of us to stay healthy.

We have all heard about the 2½ hour choir practice that led to an outbreak of COVID-19 in Washington state. During this practice the members often sat less than 1 foot apart and did not wear masks. Some of them also spent time together in a small, poorly ventilated room. Another example, closer to home, was a cluster of infections following a college graduation party in Stevens Point. Whenever people gather together it is easy to forget the ‘6 foot’ distancing rule – so wearing a mask is very helpful in making sure you do not spread COVID-19 from yourself to a friend. The mask is a key second level of protection that is useful in keeping the risk of spreading COVID-19 low. A group of physicians and scientists in Germany carefully studied how air flow impacts the spread of this virus during singing and playing wind instruments. They found that keeping 6 feet apart prevented the particles that spread COVID-19 from passing between people. This similarly applied to speaking, singing, and playing wind instruments. Being outside was especially safe - there was little risk of spread when 6-foot distancing was maintained. In order to simulate the outside air environment, they recommended 4 to 8 air changes per hour in a room where people gathered in order to make air fresh and lower the amount of any floating virus. Supporting this is hospital rooms have 6 air changes per hour and there have been no outbreaks of COVID-19 in USA hospitals. Cleaning the air with high efficiency filters and other equipment can also lower any virus present.

In summary, we can go to Church with a very small risk of catching COVID-19 if we pay careful attention to hygiene and modify our routines while this virus is around. Three key things as a faith group we need to do are 1) physical distancing – stay 6 feet apart, 2) cover the nose and mouth, and 3) have sufficient room ventilation. If we help each other be safe we can achieve the United Methodist Church’s goal to have healthy congregations worshipping together.

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