

Flattening the curve means keeping churches closed for now, leaders say

by Tammy Warren | *Presbyterian News Service*



LOUISVILLE — For a couple of months now, Presbyterians and other faith groups have been staying healthy at home, washing their hands constantly, social distancing, taking part in virtual church through social media, wearing face masks for quick trips to the pharmacy or grocery store or even to walk the dog.

In Kentucky and in other states, more than 99 percent of churches remain closed to in-person gatherings. All are supposed to be closed, but some have chosen to defy their governor's order to remain closed.



The Rev. Todd Freeman, pastor of College Hill Presbyterian Church in Tulsa, posted that this week the session voted to stay closed to in-person church activities “until reason and science indicate it is safe for our members and visitors”. With about 200 members on its roll, College Hill Presbyterian Church has been holding virtual services on Sunday mornings with downloadable bulletins to allow people to follow along in the order of worship. The bulletin and video follow what a regular in-person service of worship looks like, Freeman said, which provides a sense of being present with one another. Freeman does understand the need to get the economy up and running again, but the safety of church members and visitors must take priority, he said. The church has formed a re-entry team that will be looking closely at how several things may be done differently to ensure initial and long-term safety, after data shows the health crisis has passed. He hopes when that happens there would be a general “all clear,” rather than having to be overly protective — every other pew, masks, hand sanitizer — when people do come back. This time of quarantine has been productive, with the church learning much about video recording and editing. Freeman said it's been a steep learning curve that's been worth it. “In a way more people are watching the YouTube video than would show up on a Sunday morning, so I think we are doing some evangelism,” he said. He believes that even after people are able to worship together in person, College Hill Presbyterian Church will maintain a virtual presence. He has heard from several members who had stopped coming to worship regularly who have tuned in to services or participated in Zoom ministry meetings and adult church school.



The Rev. Aisha Brooks-Lytle, executive presbyter of the [Presbytery of Greater Atlanta](#), said churches throughout the presbytery have done a remarkable job making the shift from in-person to online worship. She said presbytery staff and leadership have been “astounded” by the ability of congregations to do what would have been impossible years ago, and for being creative, faithful, steadfast leaders during the pandemic crisis.