

From General Assembly, edited by Jim Gear



**Read and heed 'Returning to Church' long before it's deemed safe to worship in person ---** A guide from the Wisconsin Council of Churches has valuable suggestions, issues to consider

*by Mike Ferguson*

"Returning to Church," a new guide by the Wisconsin Council of Churches during the pandemic and published by the Wisconsin Council of Churches, may be the best thing to come out of the Badger State since bratwurst. It's being offered "as a framework to guide clergy and lay leaders in making healthy and pastoral decisions, not as a fixed set of guidelines that will account for every circumstance".

During the **first phase** of what's been dubbed in Wisconsin as the **Badger Bounce Back Plan** - most other states have similar plans - churches should continue holding online worship services only. Bible studies and small groups continue to meet online. High risk individuals - people over 60 and those with underlying conditions, should continue to shelter in place.

Several weeks later, during **phase 2** and depending on "careful observance of physical/social distancing recommendations on an ongoing basis," churches with fewer than 50 in attendance might consider holding in-person worship, although those 60 and older and people with underlying conditions are recommended to continue to shelter in place. The document recommends continuing to share worship online even as worship is offered in person, "as there will be many who are at high risk and cannot join you or may not feel safe to return even if precautions are in place." Each worshiper should wear a cloth face mask. Congregational singing "is among the riskier behaviors" because singing more forcefully than speaking spreads the droplets a significant distance and keeps them suspended in the air. Use bulletins and then discard them, and don't use hymnals and pew Bibles for the time being. Use no-touch alternatives for passing the peace and collecting offering and keep empty pews between families. "Returning to Church" recommends against holding a fellowship time before or after worship, instead encouraging people to leave the building rather than mingling. Holding in-person Vacation Bible School is not recommended this summer. Consider online activities instead. "Similarly, we anticipate mission trips to be unwise for some time," the guide says. "This is an ideal time for mission in the local area." Regular office functions could resume during this phase "more or less safely while maintaining social distancing and wearing masks."

During the **third phase** of the Badger Bounce Back Plan, physical distancing is not required. But "we recommend that you avoid crowding in the sanctuary to the extent possible." Fellowship hour is still discouraged during this phase, but "it should be safe for Bible studies and small groups to meet in person," as well as groups, teams and committees.

**I downloaded this and it is available at Trinity Office: "Returning to Church," a new guide by the Wisconsin Council of Churches**