Our faith communities know well the suffering COVID-19 has brought to their health and economics, and we hear our moral calling to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. As we now consider the question of opening our houses of worship again, we rely on the medical community and discernment from God to make safe decisions on when and how to worship in person.

**Reset expectations**
As leaders, we serve our people well by communicating clearly that there is no cure for COVID-19. With stay-at-home orders lifting, more people will be infected. Public health experts anticipate the virus will circulate in the US with variable levels of infection for the foreseeable future. Therefore, faith leaders should plan wisely how to reopen houses of worship and offer assurance to congregants that even as we gather in ways that look different than before, we continue being mindful of health and safety.

**Understand the virus loves worship as much as we do**
Worship presents factors that favor transmitting COVID-19, including people close together, an enclosed environment with limited ventilation, and surfaces that multiple people touch. Also, most worship services feature congregational singing, one of the riskiest activities because it propels respiratory droplets almost 30 feet. If a person infected with COVID-19 is present, congregational worship can be a perfect storm for spreading the virus.

**Mitigate risks while still being a community**
Public health efforts to manage the ongoing presence of the virus in our community will include testing, contact tracing, and quarantining contacts of infected people. The CDC, the State of Tennessee, and Memphis and Shelby County public health officials provide guidance on how faith communities can both gather as the people of God and mitigate the risks of spreading the virus.

- **Phase-in opening your building** and restoring your gatherings so you can track any outbreaks in your congregation or surrounding community and be ready to adapt.
- **Limit the spread** by making sure family units sit six feet away from each other. Ask everyone to wear masks.
- **Modify services**, such as shortening duration, taking a hiatus from congregational singing, and reevaluating how you administer communion.
- **Support the wider community’s effort** to contain the virus by keeping attendee contact information up-to-date to assist with contact tracing if necessary.
- **Maintain a robust sanitation plan** of common areas and shared surfaces.
- **Continue to stream** or record services as an alternative to in-person attendance. Keep meeting virtually for Bible studies and other events.

**Be a source of reliable information**
Create a communication plan that embraces and promotes best health practices for individuals, including remaining at home in the event of any kind of illness. Address misinformation directly when you are aware of it in your congregation.

Our calling is beyond whether we meet this week or this month. COVID-19 will pass. Living into the calling to love one another and our neighbors during this passage will show we are God’s people.

**Additional Resources:**
- **Shelby County Health Department:** shelbytnhealth.com
- **Tennessee Department of Health:** tn.gov/health.html
- **Center for Disease Control:** cdc.gov

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**ChurchHealth.org**