

Stokesdale UMC

Policy: Healthy Gathering

Date: December 3, 2020

This document has been prepared to provide guidance for Stokesdale UMC (SUMC) as to how we can gather safely during the COVID19 Pandemic. This document is not all-inclusive and for those instances where measures are not covered specifically, we will seek guidance from the Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church, the State of North Carolina, and the CDC. When we are ever in doubt as to what we should do, we will seek to err on the side of caution and safety.

We have assembled a COVID Task Force (CTF) to lead SUMC through the pandemic. The CTF will work closely with the Pastor, Board of Trustees and report directly to the Administrative Council. The recommendations of the CTF are to be taken seriously and are to be implemented in a timely manner. If a recommendation is disputed, it will be voted upon by a called meeting of the Administrative Council.

Science tells us:

- The greatest risk of exposure from COVID-19 comes from airborne particles. We create these airborne particles every time we breathe. If the virus is present in our bodies it attaches to these airborne particles. The larger the particle the greater the viral load. The largest particles are produced by coughing and sneezing. Singing and talking produce airborne particles as well.
- The largest particles will fall to the ground under the influence of gravity within 6 feet. For this reason, we maintain a safe distance of 6 feet. In addition, wearing a mask reduces both the distance the particles travel and the number of particles that can travel beyond the mask (note: masks aren't foolproof).
- Smaller particles remain in the air for longer periods of time, eventually dispersing throughout the room. In a confined space like the sanctuary or a classroom these particles can be recirculated by the HVAC system. In this situation there are two concerns: the health of the individual and the time of exposure. Limited amounts of time for a healthy person is much less risky than lengthy periods of time for someone who is immunocompromised. Meeting outside means these small particles are dispersed more broadly, creating less overall risk.
- Singing produces a large number of small airborne particles, increasing the viral load in a room. In addition, singers breathe more deeply, inhaling these particles further into their lungs, creating greater risk for contracting the disease.
- Surfaces become contaminated by droplets that fall. Touching a contaminated surface and then touching your nose or eyes can lead to infection. For this reason, we recommend refraining from touching our faces. In addition, if the virus is present in your body and you touch your nose or sneeze, then the virus will be on your hand. For this reason, frequent handwashing is recommended.
- Over the course of time all the airborne particles will fall to the ground and the virus will cease to be viable.

Scripture tells us:

Jesus affirms that the greatest commandment is "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). Our healthy gathering policy has been created to affirm our love for God and our love for one another.

In addition, Paul writes, "The body does not consist of one member but of many... The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'... On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable... God has so arranged the body... [that] members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Corinthians 12:14-26 selected verses). The recommendations listed below are part of our sacred responsibility to care for one another as the body of Christ.

Following the guidelines laid out by the State of North Carolina, we require the three W's for all gatherings at Stokesdale UMC:

1. **W**ear a mask
2. **W**ash your hands
3. **W**ait 6 feet apart from one another

We plan to continue broadcasting Sunday worship and strongly recommend:

1. Worshipping from home if you are at higher risk of infection or complications due to your age, serious health issues, or if sharing a home with someone at high risk.
2. Worshipping from home if you have a fever, body aches, a sore throat, a cough, a runny nose, nausea, diarrhea, or other symptoms.
3. Worshipping from home for at least two weeks if you or someone in your immediate household comes in contact with a known or suspected case. This follows the State recommendation to quarantine for 14 days following a suspected or known exposure.

Our worship space will look different as we will:

1. Take the temperature of each individual as they arrive and not allow someone to enter if they are running a fever higher than 99.5 degrees Fahrenheit.
2. Record the name & contact information of those attending service in person (for medical tracking purposes).
3. Provide masks for those who do not have their own.
4. Provide hand sanitizer at each entrance.
5. Have ushers seat individuals and families as they arrive, honoring the recommended 6 feet of space between family units. Parents are asked to ensure their children remain within the family unit and maintain social distancing.
6. Clean the sanctuary, adjoining rooms and restrooms each week (see Reopening Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfecting Public Spaces, Workplaces, Businesses, Schools, and Homes - CDC).
7. Encourage people to leave the building after worship and talk with one another outside. We ask that while visiting outside that you maintain social distancing and we recommend that you continue to wear your mask.

Our worship service will be different as we will:

1. No congregation singing and responsive readings since both appear to produce more airborne droplets.
2. Pass the peace by remaining in place, making eye contact with others, and using sign language or verbal greetings.
3. Ask children to remain with their parents for the Children's Celebration.
4. Share communion by participating silently in the liturgy and partaking of elements that have been safely prepared ahead of time.
5. Not pass an offering plate to limit spread of the virus by contact. Offering "stations" will be available at both entrances and electronic giving will continue to be recommended.

Other precautions will include:

1. Posting and recommend the following guidelines for use of the bathrooms:
 - a. Use the bathroom one family unit at a time.
 - b. Wash your hands upon entering.
 - c. Wash your hands after using the toilet
 - d. Use the paper towel to turn off the faucet and open the door.
 - e. An adult should accompany elementary age & younger children to the bathroom to ensure guidelines are followed.
2. Requesting that everyone who tests positive for COVID-19 or has developed COVID-like symptoms and has participated in worship in the sanctuary in the two weeks prior to developing these symptoms contact

the Pastor or the Church Council chair as soon as possible. Leadership of the church will be informed so that appropriate action may be taken, including sharing of attendance records with medical contact tracers, however the name of the infected person will not be shared with the congregation without permission.

Recommendations for other gatherings:

1. We plan to refrain from gathering for Sunday school until the public schools fully reopen. At that time, we will assess options for safe gathering of our various classes.
2. We will refrain from offering a nursery until further notice.
3. We will establish guidelines with groups that regularly use the building to ensure the health and wellbeing of all.

In preparation for gathering in person once again we will:

1. Review latest recommendations of:
 - a. WNCC (<https://www.wnccumc.org/covid>)
 - b. State of NC (<https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/>)
 - c. CDC (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/>)
2. Recruit and train ushers (see Disaster-Ministries-Volunteer-Guidelines). This will be key to implementation of this policy.
3. Create an attendance list to facilitate taking attendance each week. Visitors will be asked for a phone number or email address. These records will be kept in the office and be made available to contact tracers as necessary.
4. Order masks and hand sanitizer and place them at entrances, and gloves (non-latex) for anyone allergic to Latex.
5. Clean the church (see Reopening Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfecting Public Spaces, Workplaces, Businesses, Schools, and Homes - CDC).
6. Remove hymnals, Bibles, pencils, etc. and set up offering "stations" at both entrances to limit the potential of spreading the virus by contact.
7. Post signs at entrances and in bathrooms.