

Gathering Together Task Force
Guidance for Muhlenberg Lutheran Church
December 2020-March 2021
Updated December 17, 2020

Our community, country, and world have been faced with remarkable challenges and changes in the midst of COVID-19. Families have been unable to gather, school and work have moved online, restaurants and stores are slowly reopening after months of closures, sports and entertainment events are cancelled, and our economy is taking a larger hit than we could have imagined. Our own community, Harrisonburg, has been hit hard by the virus. As of December 17, 2020, Harrisonburg/Rockingham has reported over 7,000 total cases, and the 7-day average of positive tests is 15.0 percent for the Central Shenandoah Health District.

At the same time, our hearts break at being separated from one another. We yearn to return to in-person worship and activities. Worshipping together is a central part of being a church, and we miss the community of being together as the body of Christ.

Unfortunately, research and anecdotal evidence keep pointing to the danger of gathering in a large group, in an enclosed space. Each day, new outbreaks that originated in congregational settings are reported. Some of the things that appear to spread COVID-19 the most, such as handshakes and hugs, singing, and sharing food, are the same things that are at the heart of our worship gathering. We also know that a large portion of our congregation falls into an “at-risk” category, and would not be able to join the assembly for worship. Having a worship service in which only a portion of our congregation would be permitted to attend does not embody the heart of who we are as a congregation, equipping all people to live out Christ’s love.

With all of these things in mind, we have been praying extensively and consulting multiple sources to determine what we believe to be Muhlenberg’s call of the Holy Spirit in response to the regulations and advice of government and health care officials, as well as leaders in the Virginia Synod. **We believe the church has the responsibility to act in good prudence, with an abundance of caution, and also with a heart for outreach for all—especially those who are at-risk.**

Because of this, **we recommend that Muhlenberg Lutheran Church does not return to in-person worship at this time, and has set a date of March 15, 2021 to re-evaluate and make a decision for moving forward.**

This means that exclusively-online and phone-in worship will continue through the winter, which allows us to continue to offer high-quality, intimate worship experiences for all people. It also allows us to put our energy and creativity into discerning how we can be church faithfully in these times, caring for all of our members.

While an abundance of caution and love has led us not to re-open our sanctuary at this time for Sunday worship, there is much that CAN be done through this season.

1. **We can trust God.** Scripture reminds us that we never walk alone, that we needn't worry, and that all of creation rests in God Almighty's hand. Our neighbors and our world are watching us for our response to this crisis. Let's lead people to the love of God by our faith and example.
2. **We can be patient.** Immunizations are on the way. The best scientific minds in the world are working on this issue, and God is the One who gave medical and scientific professionals their skills and aptitudes to do this work.
3. **We can continue with our ministries:** online Bible studies, book groups, and fellowship opportunities for all ages; music ministry offered outdoors and/or online; care and prayer for one another; building community connections through organizations serving the most vulnerable; mask making for community organizations; and engaging in synodical ministries like Kairos and Power in the Spirit online.
4. **We can continue to thank people for their gifts of offering** and communicate the difference their gifts are making.
5. **We can expand our building's use** during the week through safe procedures set up for Day Care, Second Home, and support groups using the space.
6. **We can begin to gather in ways that reduce (though not eliminate) our risk of transmission.** This document outlines guidelines for in-person pastoral care and small group gatherings.
7. **We can dream about, and plan for, the future.** We have been given a unique opportunity to allow God to do a new thing in our midst, that can unleash the gospel in ways we would have never even imagined. What will ministry at Muhlenberg Lutheran Church look like going forward?

People are hungry for God, for faith, for community and for connection. If we are deliberate and careful, we will in the future be able to look back on this as a time of great growth for Muhlenberg.

As always, we would be happy to talk with you about our decisions, and hear any ideas you have for the good of our shared ministry. Thank you for being part of this family of faith. May God sustain us in this liminal time, and renew our imagination for what lies ahead.

In Christ,

The Gathering Together Task Force

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Pastoral Care

Out of an abundance of caution, the pastors have greatly limited in-person pastoral care. They will provide in-person pastoral care when necessary, and with the following guidelines in place. These guidelines are presented to protect the health of our pastors while allowing them to provide service to our members in a safe setting

- Virtual/phone visits will be conducted as much as possible
- Priority for in-person visits will be given to those who do not have internet access or are especially isolated
- Pastors will limit to one in-person visit per day per pastor

When meeting in person:

- Pastor and parishioner will maintain physical distancing of at least 6 feet
- When possible, visit will take place outside or on a porch. Indoor visits will be limited to 20 minutes.
- Both pastor and parishioner will wear a mask at all times
- There will be no physical contact between the pastor and parishioner (e.g., hand-holding during a prayer, hug or handshake upon arrival, etc.)
- Both pastor and parishioner will wash hands before and after visit
- If the person being visited, or any of their family members, have been exposed to COVID in the last 14 days, or are experiencing any of the symptoms, the meeting will be rescheduled.

Staff/Volunteers Working in the Office

Staff will continue to mainly work from home. They will be available via phone, email, and Zoom meeting.

When multiple staff or volunteers are in the building, they will wear a mask, wash hands upon arrival, and maintain 6 feet physical distance from one another.

Using the Buildings at Muhlenberg

The campus of Muhlenberg has been divided into “Zones,” which will keep the various groups using the space separate.

Zone 1: Office/Administration.

Enter through Gathering Area doors, walk through south end doors to sanctuary to office wing.

Use bathroom in office wing.

Cleaning responsibility: Chip

Zone 2: Harrisonburg-Rockingham Day Care.

Main building: Enter through back red doors, walk up stairs to third floor. Use bathrooms on 3rd floor and, if absolutely necessary, in Gathering Area.

Cleaning responsibility: Jim

MAC: Enter through side stairwell door, walk up stairs to second floor. Children and staff only; no parents in building. Use bathrooms on 2nd floor.

Cleaning responsibility: Jim

Zone 3: Second Home.

Enter through main MAC doors. Children and staff only; no parents in building. Use bathrooms on 1st floor.

Cleaning responsibility: 2nd Home staff

Zone 4: Music/Sanctuary.

Enter through Gathering Area doors. Continue to chancel area or go downstairs to music office/choir room. Use bathrooms on bottom level of Gathering Area.

Cleaning responsibility: Chip

Zone 5: Support groups.

Enter through outside door to Nielsen Room. Use bathrooms between Wayland and Nielsen Room.

Cleaning responsibility: Main responsibility is the group using space. Follow up by Chip.

Rules for groups using MLC space:

- Doors to the building will stay locked at all times
- Maintain physical distancing of at least 6 feet
- Masks must be worn at all times
- Hands must be sanitized/washed upon entering building
- No shared food or drink--participants must bring their own individual cups of coffee
- Coffee pots and small downstairs kitchen will not be used
- One person in the restroom at a time
- An attendance list, with names/emails/phone numbers must be kept (for contact tracing if necessary)
- Nielsen Room attendance limit is 16
- The leader of the group is responsible for making sure that all participants are following all above guidelines, including staying in their group's designated zone, and for keeping the attendance list. The leader must sign a document, kept on file at the church office, affirming that they will abide by these guidelines.
- An additional facility fee of \$10/month will be charged to outside support groups for cleaning supplies
- Must inform church immediately if a member of the group has a positive COVID test. In the event of a positive COVID test among a participant, that zone will be closed for 14 days. The rest of the building's usage will be evaluated with the consultation of the health department.
- Any member of the group who isn't feeling well, has been exposed to COVID in the past 14 days, or is experiencing any of the symptoms must stay home.

Muhlenberg Lutheran Church will do the following:

- Post signage that describes policies and best hygiene practices
- Post signage for entrance
- Mark off six foot spacing in Nielsen Room
- Remove items from Nielsen Room to avoid the need for extra cleaning
- Post signage to encourage one person in restroom at a time
- Provide cleaning supplies and hand sanitizer

Meeting Outside the Muhlenberg Buildings

For groups in the congregation who wish to meet in person, such as a fellowship group, Bible study, or music group, the following guidelines should be followed:

- Must meet outside (see some suggested meeting locations below)
- Masks must be worn, and hands washed/sanitized upon arrival and departure
- Group size must not exceed 10
- Physical distancing of at least 6 feet must be enforced between people who are not in the same family
- Participants must provide their own personal chair, if not using a pavilion
- Participants must bring their own personal food and drinks
- Participants should sign up ahead of time (to prevent too large of a group)
- There should be no physical contact between participants (no hugging, handshakes, etc.)
- There should be no singing as part of the gathering
- An attendance list, with phone number/email, must be kept (for contact tracing, if necessary)
- If a participant is not feeling well, has been exposed to COVID in the last 14 days, or is experiencing any of the symptoms of COVID, they must stay home.

Suggested locations for gathering:

Harrisonburg Parks: <https://www.harrisonburgva.gov/shelters>

Oakdale Park (Bridgewater): <https://bridgewater.town/>

Restaurants with outdoor seating in downtown Harrisonburg:
<https://downtownharrisonburg.org/covid19/>

Parking Lot Gatherings

If a ministry of Muhlenberg wishes to have a gathering in the MLC parking lot (e.g. Christian formation activity, prayer gathering), the following guidelines should be followed:

- Must take place on a Saturday or Sunday, and arranged ahead of time with the church office
- All participants (with the exception of group leader/s) must stay in their vehicles at all times. No bathrooms will be available.
- Cars must be spaced at least six feet apart
- Masks must be worn at all times
- If distributing food, it must be prepackaged.

Worship and Sacraments

While we will not gather in the sanctuary for weekly worship, there are still opportunities for special services to occur. The following guidelines will be followed:

Baptisms

- Limit participants to 1 pastor, parents and sponsors/godparents properly spaced around font
- Additional participants, totaling no more than 10 (including pastor, parents, and sponsors), spaced 6ft apart, for both indoor or outdoor baptisms.
- Observe all safety protocols mentioned in “Rules for Groups” and/or “Meeting Outside...” above
- Scheduled on a Saturday or Sunday to limit interaction with weekday staff/kids
- The baptismal liturgy will be recorded and the video added to the next Sunday service for the community to affirm the promises of baptism
- Font to be sanitized before and after baptism
- No indoor “reception” gathering after baptism is complete

Weddings

- Limit participants to 1 pastor and 10 total participants, spaced 6 feet apart, for both indoor and outdoor weddings
- Observe all safety protocols mentioned in “Rules for Groups...” and/or “Meeting Outside...” above
- Congregation’s participation will be limited to spoken responses, with no congregational singing
- Communion will not be offered
- Scheduled on a Saturday or Sunday to limit interaction with weekday staff/kids
- For Sat wedding, Fri rehearsals to be held after both daycares have left campus
- No indoor “reception” gathering after ceremony is complete
- Live-streaming or recording the ceremony may be done to share the service with family and friends unable to attend

Funerals

- Limit participants to 1 pastor and 10 total participants, spaced 6 feet apart, for both inside and outside/graveside services
- Obituary must state funeral service will be private (no details)
- Congregation’s participation will be limited to spoken responses, with no congregational singing
- Communion will not be offered
- No indoor “reception” gathering after ceremony is complete

- Live-streaming or recording the ceremony may be done to share the service with family and friends unable to attend

Eucharist

- At this time, the sacrament of Holy Communion will be offered at Zoom worship services and monthly Parking Lot Services only
- “Drive-Thru” communion, where communion is passed to cars pulling through the parking lot, is not congruent with Lutheran sacramental theology and is unlikely to be a safe practice
- *We experience the Eucharist as a means of grace, and a gift given from God’s abundance. Our salvation is not endangered by abstaining from communion, and we trust at this time that it is sufficient to feast upon the Word alone.*