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# RETURNING TO CHURCH

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## Overview

*Last edited: August 12, 2020*

*Dear people of St. Philip Lutheran Church,*

*Our Congregation Council has continued to meet to discuss a return to in-person worship. Through conversation and dialogue, we affirmed our policies and precautions, recognizing we have an incredibly good plan in place. And while the future is uncertain, Council is now looking to a hopeful return to in-person worship on September 13. This allows time for the face-mask policy in our area to show results, decreases the tourist crowds, and hopefully continues the downward decline in cases in our area.*

*Of course, we will need to be flexible during this time and be guided by numbers in Horry County and Myrtle Beach. Council will continue to meet for conversation and planning. We will do our best to communicate effectively with you to make sure you know exactly when and how the building will open.*

*There are a few things worth noting. First, people are on both sides of the issue about gathering for in-person worship – even at a date several weeks out. We suspect that is true in the congregation, too, and not just Council. For some, we have been closed too long. For others, we will open too early.*

*Second, we feel it is important to remind everyone that each should make the best choice for themselves and their family about when to return to in-person worship. Just because the building is open does not mean you need to come. We will still live-stream the 10:30 a.m. worship service on our Facebook page for the foreseeable future, as well as offer our “Song & Story” worship online only Wednesday nights.*

*Third, there will not be a “perfect time” to open – at least not for a long time. As such, we will use an abundance of caution – cleaning and sanitizing, physical distancing, masks and face-coverings, much less singing, and no fellowship time. The rest of this document contains the policies and procedures we will follow to keep us all safe. We encourage you to become familiar with them so you know what to expect when you do choose to return.*

*Please know it is not going to be the same. But God is present with us in this time – whether we are in the church building or not. Please, be thoughtful and safe as you discern when the best time is for you to return to worship. If you choose to join with us when we do open our building again, please follow these guidelines and precautions – if not for your sake, for the sake of others.*

*Congregation Council of St. Philip Lutheran*

# History & General Overview

June 10, 2020

*As businesses and restaurants begin opening again, many are asking, when can we go back to church?*

*This question brings lots of emotions with it. This is a place we love – with people we love! We are fed spiritually, comforted with words of hope, reminded of a grace and love that is for us. But we also need to be careful during this time. A church building is a place for large gatherings, with many common surfaces, and not much room to physically distance.*

*We want to respect the choices of all visitors and members, no matter where they find themselves. As evidenced by a recent survey of our congregation, some people are undoubtedly ready to return to worship. Others don't think they are quite ready and will choose to stay home for some time longer. And still others are in the middle - ready to return but will do so with an abundance of caution.*

*We hope to be clear in our plan and approach so you can make the most informed decision about when you personally will return to in-person worship. Congregation Council has had ample time for conversation. We have planned and prepared carefully. We hope to be intentional and effective in communication.*

*With this in mind, we are planning a way where all of us can come back together safely but also in a way where we can be worshipful. Just because we had to rush to close our building does not mean we should rush to come back. We have been working on safe guidelines to ensure the health of everyone who comes to St. Philip.*

*Congregation Council again met on June 9, 2020 to discuss our approach to returning to in-person gatherings, with a hope of gathering again soon. As of Council's meeting, Horry County was declared a "hot spot," putting a hold on in-person gatherings. Until we see a decline (preferably for 14 days) in the cases of COVID-19, we will not be gathering for in-person worship. When we do gather, we will be prepared to worship in the church building every other week, along with some additional health and safety guidelines. (More on that below.) Council will be meeting regularly via video conferences to discuss the trends in infections and making sure we have the best plan in place.*

*May God continue to walk with us during this time.*

*Congregation Council of St. Philip Lutheran*

# In-Person Gathering Highlights

*This page is a summary of the implementations St. Philip Lutheran Church is planning in preparation to return to in-person worship. Please read the full document to see what other changes may affect you and/or your family upon returning.*

## Individual Choice

**Just because the building is open doesn't mean you have to come.**

We want to respect the choices of all visitors and members, no matter where they find themselves. Our goal in these precautions is to balance the need for health and safety while still providing a worshipful experience. We do encourage each individual and family to weigh their options about when to return to worship at St. Philip. And no matter if we see you soon or in a few months, you are part of our family of faith.

We want you to feel safe when you return to worship with us.

## Live Streaming

**We will live-stream the 10:30 a.m. service on our Facebook page for the foreseeable future.**

This will provide an opportunity for those who are distancing themselves to still participate in hearing the Good News of God through worship.

## In-Person Worship Every Other Week

As we begin to gather back, we will do so every-other week. This will allow for us to gather and worship together, but it also gives time for the incubation period of the virus. This time apart will allow anyone who is infected to realize their symptoms and not return to a place where it may spread easily.

## Cleaning & Sanitation

**We will clean and disinfect after each worship service.**

We will have a dedicated crew of volunteers who will disinfect the pews after each worship service. This will include the tops, sides, and backs of the pews. Also, these volunteers will wipe down the door handles to the sanctuary and bathrooms after each service.

We will post signs around the building after each round of disinfecting stating the date and time pews, door handles, and bathrooms were cleaned.

## It Will Be Different

### Physical Distancing; Less Singing; No Fellowship

Things will look and feel different when we return. Many of the things we love about gathering in-person will be missing. There will be no hugs or handshakes, our regular seat may be blocked off, and there won't be hymnals to use. Even as we try to return to normal, some changes are necessary for the health of all who gather. During this time, we hope all will be open to these changes, trusting that it is out of an abundance of care and caution that these changes are being implemented.

## What will be the same?

*Coming back to church should, in many ways, be like coming home. We want you to feel welcomed and comfortable. So, while some things will be different, here is what will remain the same.*

### Focus on Worship

We will, for the time being, only be gathering for worship on Sunday mornings. This will limit the use of the building, thus keeping the areas and amount of cleaning manageable. We will keep our two worship services at 8:30 and 10:30 a.m. (masks required) while encouraging more participation at the earlier service, as it provides more room for physical distancing. Should the sanctuary reach a capacity that infringes on safe physical distancing, our Fellowship Hall will be setup to participate in and view the livestream of our worship service in a safe way.

Also, as we begin to gather back, we will do so every-other week. This will allow for us to gather and worship together, but it also gives time for the incubation period of the virus. This time apart will allow anyone who is affected to realize their symptoms and not return to a place where it may spread easily.

We will, of course, still have the familiar building, beautiful stained-glass windows, and roof that creaks when the wind blows just right. There will be organ, piano, and many pieces of familiar Lutheran liturgy.

### Hand Sanitizer

As was the case before we were physically distanced, there is hand sanitizer in each book rack of every pew. We encourage use of hand sanitizer upon entering and exiting worship, as well as after touching one's eyes, nose, or face. We strongly encourage the washing of hands after restroom visits.

### Ushers and Greeters

We will still have ushers and greeters, though their roles will look slightly different. At least one of our ushers and greeters will be outside each entrance to welcome you, but also to remind you of some of our changes – like seating, physical distancing, and where to find bulletins. They will also make note of the signs we will have posted around as extra reminders to us all. Another usher will take your name for attendance. This gives us an accurate count of attendees, but also allows us a way to track and follow up with people who enter our building should we need to communicate about infections or precautions.

Ushers will not pass out bulletins; instead they will be placed on a table for you to pick up as you enter.

### Live Streaming on Facebook

While streaming our services straddles the line of “same” and “new,” we will continue to live-stream our 10:30 a.m. worship services on Facebook. This will provide an opportunity for those who are distancing themselves to still participate in hearing the Good News of God through worship. This will be different - and maybe a bit awkward - for those present, as a cellphone will be moving around the worship space, but until we have a more permanent and discrete way of streaming our services, an iPhone will have to do.

# What changes will be made?

*Even as we try to return to normal, some changes are necessary for the health of all who gather. During this time, we hope all will be open to these changes, trusting that it is out of an abundance of care and caution that these changes are being implemented.*

## Entrances Limited & Doors Propped Open

On Sunday mornings, all entrance and exit doors will be propped open so there will be no need to touch handles. Also, we will limit the entrance/exit doors to the 62nd Ave side of our building.

Both the rear doors under the awning and the entrance on Kings Highway will have the doors open.

## Masks and Face-Coverings

Masks and face-coverings (like bandanas) will be required for each person when they enter the building. The mask must cover both one's mouth and nose. If you do not have a mask or face-covering, the church will have some available which can be disposed of at your home.

## Hymnals and Bulletins

We will remove all the hymnals from the racks in the pews. As we do not have a projection system, the music will be printed in the bulletin. Bulletins will not be handed out; instead, they will be placed on a small table for you to take one.

This will limit ushers coming in close contact with worship participants.

## Singing

Since studies have shown that singing spreads germs and disease much like coughing, congregational singing will be extremely limited, if there is any singing at all. Much of our liturgical music will be removed from the worship service. Hymns will be for meditation only, with a soloist singing a hymn or two.

## Pews and Seating

Pews will be clearly marked with painter's tape to allow us to keep a safe distance. Some pews will only allow seating on the ends. Others will be closed entirely to seating. We will encourage non-family members to keep a 6' distance from each other. Extra chairs will be brought in and placed at appropriate spots.

Through this plan, we will have the space for a maximum of 62 people in the sanctuary. Once we reach capacity in the sanctuary, overflow seating will be available in the Fellowship Hall where we will live-stream the service.

## Children's Ministries

For now, our children will not exit for Children's Church as they normally would. They will remain in worship with their families. As kids have a harder time physically distancing, we will keep them with their parents. This may mean a little more noise than usual during the sermon and worship. Be prepared with patience, grace, and understanding with young families and children.

The quiet baggies we typically use will be removed. Instead, a new set of coloring sheets will be available each week. We encourage families to bring their own crayons to use.

## Passing of the Peace

During this time, we will remove the passing of the peace from the service. While it is possible to pass the peace with other signs besides a handshake or hug, old habits are hard to break. We will acknowledge at the beginning of the service that we share God's peace with each other.

## Offering

We will not pass plates for offering. Baskets will be available for those who bring an offering for the church. They will be placed around the sanctuary and will be pointed out during announcements and at the offering time.

We encourage the use of online giving.

Visit <https://www.stphiliplutheranchurchmb.com/> to give online one-time or recurring.

## Communion

We will alter the frequency of our celebration of the meal even as we come together to worship. While many of us have come to find comfort and nourishment in celebrating communion together each week, it will be difficult to distribute the elements in a distance-conscious and sanitary way during worship. While we may explore other options as time goes on, we will continue the practice of "drive through" communion on Sundays we celebrate the meal.

The elements will be consecrated while we are together during worship, but distribution of those elements will not occur until after the sending. Think of it as God's food as we start our journey back into the world.

After the dismissal, the congregation will make their way to their cars. The elements will be set up in the back near the exit of the parking lot. Pastor Jason, while wearing a face mask, will use sanitized tongs to put a wafer and plastic cup into a disposable bowl. The wine will be poured from a sanitized vessel made for filling these plastic cups. The entire bowl will be handed to you through your driver side window. You will take your trash with you and dispose of it at your home.

## End of Service & Dismissal

At the conclusion of worship, ushers will dismiss the congregation one row at a time. This will allow congregants to keep physical distance as they exit.

The pastor will not stand at the exit to shake hands.

## Cleaning

We will have a dedicated crew of volunteers who will disinfect the pews after each worship service. This will include the tops, sides, and backs of the pews. Also, these volunteers will wipe down the door handles to the sanctuary and bathrooms after each service.

We will post signs around the building after each round of disinfecting stating the date and time pews, door handles, and bathrooms were cleaned.

## Conclusion

*Our goal in these precautions is to balance the need for health and safety while still providing a worshipful experience. We do encourage each individual and family to weigh their options about when to return to worship at St. Philip. And no matter if we see you soon or in a few months, you are part of our family of faith. We want you to feel safe when you return to worship with us.*

*God's peace with you all.*