

**Standards for Returning to Worship
at First Presbyterian Church, Oxford
Updated May 20th, 2020**

“... I encourage you to live as people worthy of the call you received from God. Conduct yourselves with all humility, gentleness, and patience. Accept each other with love, and make an effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit with the peace that ties you together. You are one body and one spirit, just as God also called you in one hope. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all, who is over all, through all, and in all.” (Ephesians 4:1-6, CEB)

Even in the midst of this unexpected season, we continue to be one in our Lord, in both body and spirit, as we continue to love and serve as a community of faith. There is no distance, no means of social isolation, that can ever separate us from God’s love which we know no matter when and no matter how we come together. Our collective worship online during this time serves as testimony to this fact, and yet we long for the appropriate time when we can gather in person to worship our God together as one.

In response to the presence of Covid-19, the Session created a Task Force to draft standards for gradually returning in person for worship at First Presbyterian Church. The task force reviewed guidelines from multiple sources—the CDC, the Mississippi Department of Health, the PCUSA national office, the city of Oxford, etc – and it became evident that there simply are few clearly delineated road maps to determine exactly how to go about doing this. The Task Force recommended to the Session the below plan for proceeding in three stages to gradually resuming worship and other activities as the pandemic unfolds. It was received, amended, and approved by the Session in a special called meeting on May 17, 2020.

This plan will require continued faithful discernment as we collectively act upon our best judgement based the data at hand as well as our understanding of our local circumstances. This is a fluid situation with no clear time frame. Persistent monitoring and a flexible spirit of grace will be needed as we navigate this unexpected wilderness. Our congregation’s response will require hearts full of humility, gentleness, and patience as we make every effort to love the Lord our God and our neighbors as ourselves.

This plan intentionally employs the term “stage” rather than “phase” so that the church’s guidelines are not confused with the phases released by various governmental agencies. First Presbyterian Church is currently operating under Stage 1.

Stage 1: Campus remains closed

- Worship: Online services only
- Sunday School: Online programs only
- Church office: Closed with staff working remotely. Pastoral staff to determine when clerical staff may resume work on campus.
- Bible Studies / PW / Small Groups: Online meetings encouraged. When the office is once again fully staffed on site, the Pastoral staff will determine when small groups are permitted to meet on campus. Limited to 10 persons.
- Funerals and Weddings: Limited to the maximum number of individuals as permitted by the City of Oxford. Face masks and social distancing measures to be followed as mandated by the City.
- Fellowship Events: Postponed
- PYF (Youth): Online only
- UKirk (College): Online only
- Boy Scouts: Online only

Stage 2: Campus partially opened with limited gatherings

- When: Stage 2 to be initiated after Session approval after the City of Oxford permits gatherings of 100 or more.
- Worship: Continues to be offered online with options to physically attend services with limited numbers and social distancing measures. Nursery not provided. See below for more details about worship.
- Sunday School: Online programs only
- Church office: Open with social distancing measures. Members of the congregation may come to the office by appointment only.
- Bible Studies / PW / Small Groups: Limited to 15 persons and use of upstairs conference room. Social distancing measures in place. Groups required to sanitize conference room at conclusion of meeting.
- Funerals and Weddings: Limited to the maximum number of individuals as permitted by the City of Oxford. Face masks and social distancing measures to be followed as mandated by the City.
- Fellowship Events: Postponed
- PYF (Youth): Online only
- UKirk (College): Abiding by FPC's standards in terms of individuals gathered.
- Boy Scouts: Online only

Standards for Corporate worship to resume in the Sanctuary during Stage 2:

- Two worship services offered at 8:30 and 11:00 am in order to provide appropriate spacing of congregants. 11:00 service to continue to be shared online.
- Seating in alternate pews limiting each pew to 3 family units maximum.
- Limit to 85 the number of congregants in the Sanctuary. Any additional attendees will be directed to Fellowship Hall to participate in worship via Facebook live.
- No nursery offered.
- Encourage members at high risk for contracting Covid-19 (over age 60, hypertensive, diabetic, etc) to continue to worship online.
- Congregants are to wear masks until the city suspends its requirement for wearing masks in public. Encourage members to bring their own. Masks will also be provided.
- Hand sanitizing stations available at all entrances and members asked to utilize them upon entry to the Sanctuary.
- Designated ushers will record the names as members enter the Sanctuary. Members may also indicate their presence on their devices. Should a member attending a worship service later be diagnosed with Covid-19, all others members present at that service could then be notified.
- Currently assigned ushers who may be in high risk categories to self-select if they want to continue to usher during Stage 2
- Volunteer cleaning crew to wipe down pews, door knobs, etc and clean bathrooms between services.
- All Bibles, hymnals, pew pads removed from Sanctuary
- Bulletins not handed out at the door but rather placed on pews. Bulletins also available online.
- No singing of hymns, no choir, no vocal soloists, nor wind instruments in order to minimize the risk of aerosolizing the virus in the Sanctuary.
- No children's moment during worship
- No celebrating of the sacrament of Communion in person
- Offering plates will not be passed. Offering basket will be placed in Sanctuary narthex.
- At close of service congregants depart one pew at a time starting from the rear of the Sanctuary. No gathering on the patio following the service.
- Offices are to be locked to discourage wandering within the back halls

Stage 3: Campus fully opened

- When: Stage 3 to be initiated after approval of the Session when the City Of Oxford has lifted restrictions of gatherings of 100 or more.
- Worship: Continues to be offered online and in person with unrestricted corporate worship in the Sanctuary. Social distancing and face masks may still be needed if required by the City. Communion may resume.
- Sunday School: Available should city and county schools resume on campus instruction in the fall. Anticipated start date for Sunday School, adult and children, will be September 13.
- Nursery: Open
- Church office: Open
- Bible Studies / PW / Small Groups: Available
- Funerals / Weddings: Available
- Fellowship Events: Available
- PYF (Youth) Available if local schools offering on campus instruction.
- UKirk (College) Available if the University of Mississippi is open for on campus instruction.
- Boy Scouts: Available

The Task Force had an extensive conversation regarding **when** to move from Stage 1 (our current status) to Stage 2 and ultimately to Stage 3. Acknowledging this is an exceptionally fluid circumstance, any strategy for resuming worship at FPC must remain flexible. As Dr. Anthony Fauci stated, we cannot make plans on our time line; we can only make plans on the virus' time line.

Barrett Milner, as incoming pastor, was consulted during the work of this task force. He and his family are tentatively planning to move to Oxford in mid-June. We anticipate still being in Stage 1 upon his arrival, ie, with online worship only. We recommend that only members of the PNC be present in the Sanctuary his first Sunday with us. In having an online only service that day, we can avoid having a large crowd. Hopefully soon thereafter we will be able to transition to Stage 2. Again, the virus will dictate for us when it is responsible for us to do so. The Task Force discussed this with Barrett. Acknowledging no pastor wants to have an empty Sanctuary, particularly his first Sunday, his paramount concern is for the health and well-being of his new congregation.

Respectfully submitted,

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