



Church Building Reopening Guidelines During the COVID-19 Pandemic

To help churches decide when to open their buildings for in-person worship, the Susquehanna Conference offers the following recommendations. They are based on current medical research and best practices. Because churches vary in congregation size, financial resources, and building size, location, and condition, these guidelines may be adapted to each church's context.

Our Christian Commitment

As Christians we are committed to Jesus's teaching to love God and our neighbors. As United Methodists, we observe John Wesley's admonishment to do no harm. During the pandemic, this means that we do all we can to avoid spreading the virus.

Key Facts

- COVID is spread primarily via airborne particles. It can stay suspended in the air for 13 hours. Thorough air exchange is essential.
- Variants of COVID have come to the United States and are expected to spread to Pennsylvania in March. These variants are very contagious.
- Vaccination and rigorous mask-wearing are the best ways to protect yourself and others from the virus.

When Can We Start Worshiping Indoors?

First, form a team of lay and clergy that will learn about the virus and safety practices in order to develop a plan for the church. Find many resources at susmb.org under Disaster Response and at susumc.org/covid-19/.

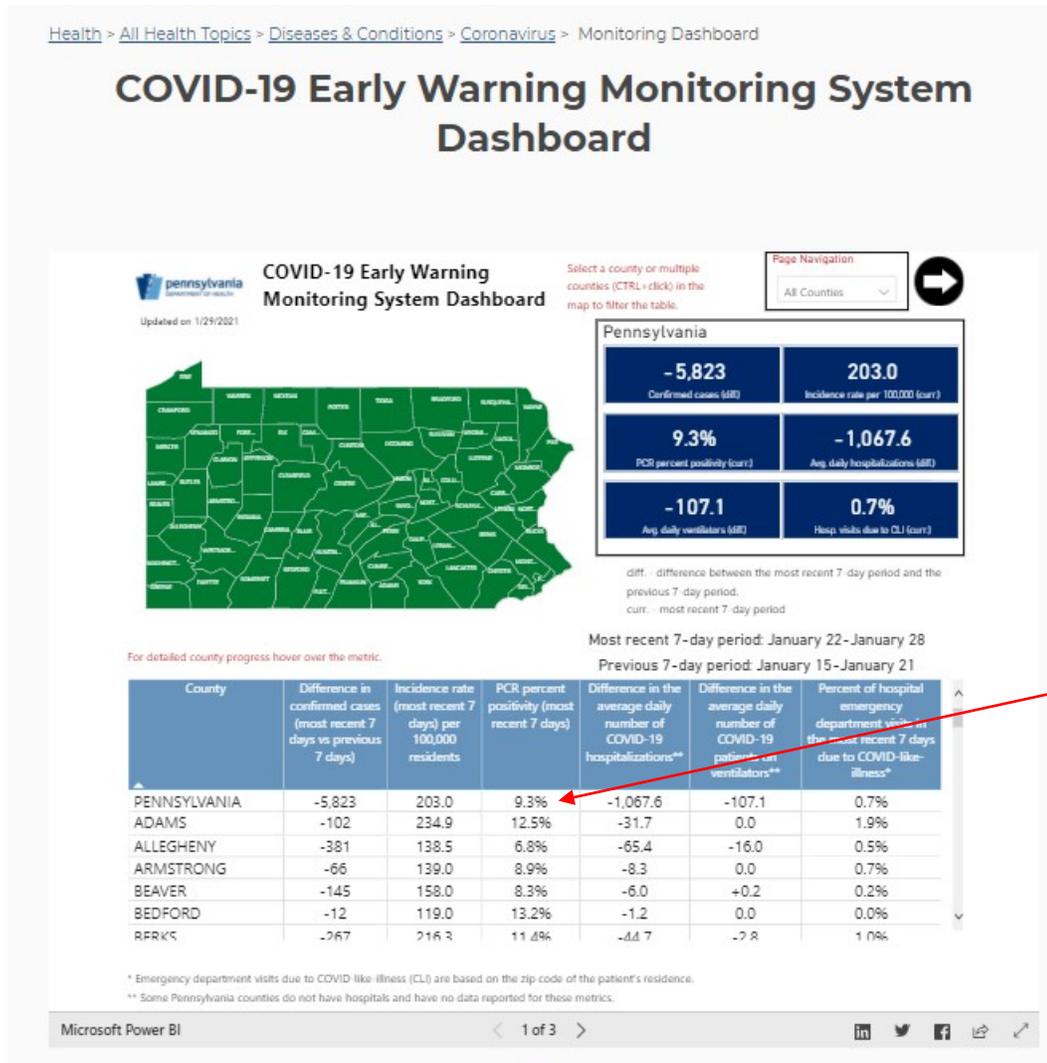
The Cabinet recommends that churches may consider offering in-person worship when the rate of positive tests for COVID in their county **has a seven-day rolling average of less than 10 percent over seven consecutive days**. Combined with excellent air exchange, mask-wearing, social distancing, and vaccination, observing this threshold will increase the likelihood that a church can safely offer in-person worship.

Where Do We Find Our Positivity Rate?

The Pennsylvania Department of Health reports daily statistics on the number of new COVID cases in each county and zip code. Find the dashboard [here](#).

Below is picture of what the dashboard looks like. When you visit the web page, look for the map. Click on your county and the chart below will display the data.

The fourth column in the chart shows the county's positivity rate over the past seven days.



Positivity rate

Positivity rates will vary over time, so **check your county's positivity rate at least weekly**. If rates rise to 10 percent or more, your church should consider pausing in-person worship services.

Safety for In-Person Worship

Even if your county's seven-day average positivity rate has fallen below 10 percent for seven days, your worshipers could still catch the virus or pass it to others. Churches that open for in-person worship should continue to take the following steps.

1. Maximize air exchange.
Conduct worship in the room with the best air exchange. Keeping windows and doors open (even in cold weather) is a good way to enhance this.
If possible, install ionization systems for your building's air handlers (HVAC units).
Worship is held more safely outdoors (while still requiring face coverings and social distancing) than indoors.
2. Disinfect the building's indoor surfaces before and after each worship service.
3. Require worshipers to wear face coverings at all times. If a medical condition precludes some from wearing a face covering, encourage those people, for their own wellbeing, not attend in-person worship at this time.
4. Require social distancing and minimize the amount of time people will be sitting or standing near each other. Roping off pews and/or otherwise indicating six-foot distances between household groups may be helpful. Forego pre- or post-worship social hours or in-person Sunday school for the time being.
5. Discourage congregational or choir singing. Some congregations are humming (while wearing masks) instead of singing.
6. Churches that expect significant numbers of people at in-person worship may consider holding more than one service.
7. Keep hand sanitizer easily available to worshipers.
8. Limit the number of bathrooms available for use.
9. Limit the number of doorways that worshipers can use to enter and exit the building.
10. Encourage your worshipers to receive the vaccine.
11. Consider requiring those who have leadership roles in worship or church ministries to obtain the vaccine as soon as it is available.
12. Consider requiring ministry volunteers who interact with the public (such as providing meals or other services) to obtain the vaccination as soon as it is available.
13. Take attendance, or require online sign-up, so that contact tracing can be conducted in the event of an exposure.

Communication

Make sure to remind worshipers that plans to hold in-person worship may change if conditions warrant. Try to plan in advance, as much as possible. Use all communication channels to keep people apprised. Be sure to "overcommunicate" the precautionary measures that will be required at in-person worship. Repetition increases the likelihood that people will remember.

Other Ways to Help

- People may be required to make immunization appointments online, but the process can be confusing. Ask those who are comfortable using the internet to help others.
- Keep worshipers informed of vaccination opportunities.
- Continue making distance worshiping (such as online) available, particularly for those who feel safer worshiping from home.
- If you have questions about planning the reopening of your church's building, contact your district office. You'll be referred to one of the members of the Susquehanna Conference COVID advisory group, who will be pleased to consult with you.

Resources

- Pennsylvania COVID Dashboard (reports positivity rates by county):
health.pa.gov/topics/disease/coronavirus/Pages/Monitoring-Dashboard.aspx
- Pennsylvania COVID Dashboard with data by Zip Code:
health.pa.gov/topics/disease/coronavirus/Pages/Cases.aspx
- Vaccination Rollout Plan (when, where, and how to get vaccinated):
health.pa.gov/topics/disease/coronavirus/Vaccine/Pages/Vaccine.aspx
- Susquehanna Conference COVID resources: susumc.org/covid-19/

Susquehanna Conference COVID Advisory Group

Dr. Wallace Greene, *Director, Diagnostic Virology Laboratory, and Associate Professor, Department of Pathology, Penn State College of Medicine*

Mr. Doug Hoy, *Disaster Response Coordinator, Susquehanna Annual Conference*

Rev. Charles Salisbury, *Pastor, Grace United Methodist Church, Hummelstown*

Dr. Kent Vrana, Elliot S. Vesell *Professor and Chair of the Department of Pharmacology, Penn State College of Medicine*

Rev. Victoria Rebeck, *Director of Connecting Ministries, Susquehanna Annual Conference*