

COVID-19 Recovery Efforts at St. Thomas UMC

Version 7 – April 15, 2021

The Bishop of the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church, Rev. Sharma Lewis, formed a “Back to In-Person Work Group” and she asked them to develop a detailed plan with comprehensive guidance for having local churches resume in-person worship in stages. The Work Group reviewed public health guidance from the federal and state governments while balancing the safety of people eventually returning to in-person worship at small, medium, and large churches. Initially, Bishop Lewis approved a comprehensive Handbook on May 13, 2020 and then on June 15, 2020 she approved the Technical Assistance Manual for Local Church (TAM) to help churches return to in-person worship and other gatherings in Stage 2. Per these recommendations, St. Thomas assembled a “Health Church Team” (HCT) that is working under the supervision of the Trustees to determine the best strategy for reopening. **Cliff Farrar, Wayne Avery, and Pastor Abi Foerster are serving on this team.** If you have questions or concerns, please feel free to contact any of the members of the team.

We are in the midst of an historic, disruptive time as our nation and our churches have responded to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. We have learned how God can work in us and how we can be a church without the church building. Though these have been painful times, we embrace the new things we have learned and the practices that have sustained us. As we prepare for the next stages in our journey with God, we want to remember John Wesley’s 3 Simple Rules:

- **Do No Harm**—We recognize that the following plan and its supporting material may seem cumbersome, restrictive, and even somewhat scary. However, we outline these details because we value the health and wellbeing of all God’s people, especially the vulnerable ones. We pray that no one will be endangered or placed at unnecessary risk, just as we desire that others would do the same to us (Luke 6:31).
- **Do Good**—By implementing the following plan, with God’s help, we seek to do all the good we can toward others. This is our prayerful effort to spread God’s love, not harm. To this end, we submit ourselves to Spirit-led self-discipline (2 Tim. 1:7) so that others may be blessed by our love-filled actions.
- **Stay in Love with God**—We long for the return to in-person worship as one of the most important means of staying in love with God (Jn. 4:23-24, Heb. 10:25).

In order to offer this precious means of grace in the safest possible way, we have relied on the best wisdom we can glean from medical, church, governmental, and legal resources. We offer the following plan, praying that in coming weeks and years, more and more people will come to know the love of God and passionately stay in it.

We will resume in-person worship gradually and with great care as the stakes are high. Our intent is to show that we care about one another through the measures outlined within this document – this is a fundamental value at St. Thomas. Therefore, we are proceeding cautiously as we do not want anyone to become sick, or die, because we rushed to gather prematurely.

Purpose of this Document

To provide clarity on recovery efforts for St. Thomas UMC (STUMC) operations, church services, facility, and staffing changes in response to COVID-19.

This document provides guidance for the following:

- Recovery Timeline and Milestones
- Service & Ministry Changes / Online Strategy
- Social Distancing / Close-Contact
- Facility Changes / Sanitization
- Special Events

The HCT created this abbreviated document in tandem with the Handbook made available by the Virginia Annual Conference to help churches reopen. The Conference Handbook contained the necessary requirements, rules, protocols, and guidance that we must follow as we prepare for and implement the changes in the way we gather and worship in person.

The Technical Assistance Manual in its entirety (28 pages) may be found on the Conference website: <https://vaumc.org/return>.

Definitions:

Vulnerable members: Over the age of 65 or immune-system compromised.

Social Distancing / Close-Contact

The Surgeon General and CDC strongly recommend that we keep social distancing (a 6' buffer between people) at all times throughout Phase 1, which may be relaxed in later phases. During Phases 1-2, social distancing needs to be adhered to and all are required to wear a mask.

Following Phase 3, the return to services will likely result in many members wishing to return to see those they've been apart from over the last few months. There will be a desire for people to come in close contact with one another, which should be avoided temporarily in Phase 3, and for our staff and congregation to be cautious of even into Phase 4.

Recovery Timeline and Milestones

STUMC has created the following recovery timetables based on Phase requirements set forth by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the Governor of Virginia and the Bishop of the Virginia Annual Conference. While some STUMC programs will continue during all phases, they may have different expressions (online vs in-person group gatherings) depending on the Phase Milestone we're currently under.



ACTIVITY	PHASE 1 RESTRICTED	PHASE 2 REDUCED	PHASE 3 LIMITED	PHASE 4 STEADY STATE
Worship	Online / FB	Online / FB / In Person up to 50	In Person **	In Person
Small Groups / Sunday School	Online / Zoom	Online / Zoom	Zoom / 10 or Fewer / Hybrid	In Person
Campus Gatherings	Closed	Closed	Open	Open
Coffee Hour	Cancelled / Zoom	Cancelled / Zoom	Outside with precautions	Resumed
Tuesday Night Dinner	Curbside Pick Up	Curbside Pick Up	Curbside Pick Up	In Person
Special Events	Cancelled	Outdoors / Case by Case	Case-by-Case	Allowed
Staff Location	100% Remote	Critical Only	On Site	On Site
Food Pantry	Curbside Pick Up	Curbside Pick Up	Curbside Pick Up	In Person
Nursery	Cancelled	10 or fewer	In Person	In Person
Local Relief	Cancelled	Hybrid	In Person	In Person
Vulnerable	Online	Online	Online	In Person

Phase 1 (RESTRICTED) Operations / 0 – 10% Capacity

Limited to gatherings of fewer than 50 Total

Phase 1 operations have the strictest requirements due to concern of spread of the virus, where we have the most responsibility of doing our part to keep social distancing and isolation of staff. No gathering of staff or congregation is authorized with the exception of production of streaming church services and recording of special communications to the congregation. Only facilities personnel and critical staff may be on campus without consent of the Senior Pastor.

Phase 2 (REDUCED) Operations / 10 – 25% Capacity

Limited to gatherings of 50 - 100 Total

Achieving Phase 2 operations allows for the lightening of restrictions towards larger gatherings and will allow for small groups of up to 10 people to gather, as they feel comfortable. We expect that no more than 50 people in one of our larger rooms (i.e. Sanctuary or Fellowship Hall) can congregate in this phase, with limitations adjusted as we near Phase 3. We are able to support “Hybrid” options (both in-person and online) worship and small groups. Children may attend with parents. No choirs or congregational singing, but music is encouraged. Congregation may hum or speak the words.

Phase 3 (LIMITED) Operations / 25 – 50% Capacity **

Limited to gatherings of 100 – 250 Total

Achieving Phase 3 Operations allows for the gathering of larger groups of people. It is expected that groups of 20, 30, 50, or 100 will be able to gather over time throughout the building, and church leadership will determine which activities will be allowed during each of those representative gathering levels, ensuring safety and security of those who gather. Once there are higher limits to the number of people that can gather, STUMC will be considered under Phase 3 operations.

Phase 4 (STEADY-STATE) Operations / 50 – 100% Capacity

Sanctuary and Fellowship Hall can accommodate full capacity of 500 Total. Achieving Phase 4 Operations is the new steady-state for STUMC, keeping protective measures in place, but allowing for the return of our vulnerable members.

Service & Ministry Changes

STUMC is currently conducting worship services in person (up to 150 people total in a sanctuary that seats 450, i.e. 33% capacity) and via livestream over the Church's Website and Facebook. Services will continue to be livestreamed online for Sunday morning and at other times as needed going forward. We are taking a hybrid approach to offering both in-person and livestream worship experiences for the general public.

Protection of Vulnerable Members

In general, people over the age of 65, and those with compromised immune systems, or anyone who is sick are strongly encouraged to participate in online services until Phase 4. We will communicate our plan via multiple methods (including mailer). We are asking volunteers in the vulnerable category to wait to serve until Phase 4 is achieved.

Service Elements

Until further notice, we will be change or reduce contact between church members of all service elements that expose multiple people:

- Communion is allowed both in-person following TAM Guidelines and for this season virtually as well. We use pre-packaged individual bread cubes and juice that are prepared by our licensed Chef and Kitchen Team. Communion will be blessed in worship and members will be directed by the Ushers to come forward and pick up their pre-packaged elements from a rolling cart that we've purchased for this portion of worship. Worshippers will then return to their seat, briefly remove their mask, and partake of the elements. We will ask worshippers to dispose of the packaging as they leave the Sanctuary.
- We will remove all material in the pew racks (hymnals, bibles, envelopes, etc.) and pens from circulation until Phase 4.
- We will distribute from and ask members to return to the Welcome Desk all commonly kept items beginning in Phase 3 (Flower Sign Up, Children's Activity Sheets) so they may be disinfected between use.
- We will "pass the peace" without touching during worship until further notice by nodding, waving, or offering other signs of greeting while maintaining social distance.
- The Worship Bulletin is available in digital format and it will also be available for individuals to pick up from a basket in Phase 3.

Welcome Team

The welcome ministry teams (greeters, ushers, parking team, welcome desk volunteers) interact with people and typically are in close contact with church members. Until further notice, STUMC volunteers will not engage in physical contact to make church members feel comfortable. A simple wave and a friendly greeting is sufficient to welcome people into the church. Even if our volunteers feel comfortable greeting with a handshake or hug, it may make others uncomfortable. Training will be conducted prior to returning to services on site. The following will be practiced by the Welcome Team:

- Refrain from handshakes or hugs until further notice.
- Provide individual items (activity sheets, first time visitor gifts) at welcome / info desk only.
- Help monitor social distancing and wearing masks.

Children's Ministry

Children's ministry will have a significant increase in oversight for interaction between the children. In addition to the increased disinfection in the children's areas, the following precautions will be in place:

- All children and volunteers will use hand sanitizer upon arrival and departure.
- Activities requiring close contact or touching of the same object are suspended until Phase 4.
- We will use larger spaces such as the Children's Worship Center and OCB Basement initially.
- Social distance kids and teens at tables or in chairs at least 6 ft. apart. Family members will be

- kept at same tables whenever possible.
- Snacks will not be included during meetings until Phase 4.
- A disinfection checklist will be in place to clean rooms between services (see Appendix 2)
- During children's moment in worship, we will initially ask children to remain in the pews. As we discern comfort levels, we will then begin inviting children forward and will mark socially distanced spaces by carpet squares, tape, or hula-hoops.

Coffee Hour Hospitality

PHASE 3 Details (Tailgating Outside):

1. All pastry individually packaged & placed in clear disposable "clam shell" containers
2. Disposable wrapped plastic forks and napkins will be used
3. Coffee pumps will be used and served by an attendant, gloved & masked
4. Pre-packaged disposable sugar/sweetener and creamers will be used
5. Wrapped coffee stirrers will be used
6. Kids/children must be accompanied by an adult

PHASE 4 Details:

1. All pastry individually packaged & placed in clear disposable "clam shell" containers
2. Disposable wrapped plastic forks and napkins
3. Coffee pumps will be used, Clorox wipes will be available for coffee pump handle
4. Pre-packaged disposable sugar/sweetener and creamers will be used
5. Wrapped coffee stirrers will be used
6. Fellowship tables will have 5 - 7 chairs per table
7. Hand wash sink, paper towels and hand sanitizer will be available

Fellowship Meals / Tuesday Night Dinner PHASE 4

Service will remain the same with the following exceptions beginning in Phase 4:

1. Servers behind steam table will be gloved and masked
2. We will use glass, china and silver. Silver will be placed in a sanitary envelope with a napkin
3. After each plate is filled by the server, a plate cover will be used, then the plate passed to the guest
4. Salads, desserts, will be plated and covered for individual guest selection
5. A new beverage station will be established and a server will prepare and serve all beverages, then pass to the guest
6. Used glass, china, and silver will be handled as prior to Covid-19
7. Glass, china, silver will be washed and sanitized using 190 degree hot water under pressure, backed up with a Quat sanitizer that is administered by the dish machine automatically
8. Tables, chairs and serving equipment will be sanitized after use, using a Quat sanitizer and disposable paper towels

Welcome / Information Desk

- We expect everyone to provide and wear his or her own mask to church. However, in the event that a mask malfunctions or becomes soiled while at church, a replacement mask is available at the welcome desk.
- Hand Sanitizer will be available as is available for purchase.

General Gatherings

During Stage 2, all in-person indoor gatherings will be limited to no more than 50 persons with 6-foot social distancing between all persons (excepting those who are in household groups) and face

coverings. Furthermore, we expect that participants of general gatherings, including those of partner groups (i.e. AA, Hispanic Congregation, Quilters Group, Classic Conversations, etc.), will either submit a Health Acknowledgement Form prior to their gathering or will require “entryway health acknowledgement” when their guests arrive. An entryway version of the Health Acknowledgement Form can be found at www.vaumc.org/return. This form will be displayed as a large poster and posted at the main entrance for each in-person gathering. Persons entering must read the form, acknowledge that they can affirm ‘yes’ to all of the statements on it to a volunteer posted at the entry, and provide their name and contact information, which the volunteer will record and the church will keep. Persons will wait in line and remain socially distanced during this entry process. Persons who cannot affirm ‘yes’ to all the statements on the form will not be able to enter. Once on site, all persons will follow other expectations as outlined in this document such as cleaning protocols, use of the restrooms, etc. Each group will complete the checklist in Appendix 3 and return to the front office to ensure cleaning protocols are followed.

Sunday School Classes / Small Groups

No classes will return to campus until Phase 3 (likely in the Fall of 2021), regardless of class size. However, mid-week groups of 10 or fewer may be able to meet after coordinating an appropriate location with Administrative staff.

Music Ministry

Choral Music Rehearsals will resume in Phase 4 with members of the band and choir serving on a weekly rotation schedule to ensure social distancing guidelines. Move towards smaller ensembles. The Bell Choir and the Praise Band may rehearse in person beginning in Phase 2. Choral music for worship will be provided by pre-recorded videos or piped in from another room through Phase 3.

Prayer Ministry

Our prayer ministry will be available during Phases 1-4 online.

Mission Changes

START mission trips and youth mission trips are on hold until Phase 3 and will have separate plans submitted by each team planning to conduct mission trips. In general, our mission field will shift towards local missions work, engaging the immediate community surrounding the church.

Food Pantry Precautions

Food Pantry will continue operating by maintaining a drive-through process, with patrons staying in their vehicles. Volunteers will also continue to maintain social distancing protocols, and wear masks and gloves.

SCC Operations

Sunbeam Child Care Center will remain open to children of essential personnel. SCC follows strict guidelines outlined by their licensing agency. These have been reviewed by the SCC Board and by the STUMC Board of Trustees.

Facility Changes / Sanitization

The following facility changes have been made to protect the congregation before, during, and following services on campus.

- Appropriate signage will be posted at the entrance and throughout the building as follows:
 - Entrance: No one with a fever or symptoms of COVID-19 or known exposure in the prior 14 days is allowed in to the building.
 - Throughout: Social distancing reminders, options other than in-person worship, and

staying home if sick.

- We are in the process of converting all adult restrooms to touch-free sink areas, to include faucets and soap dispensers. Towels will remain as they were before, and trashcans will be in place so a paper towel can be used to open the door upon exit, disposing of the towel in the trash can nearby.
- Disinfecting efforts include:
 - High-touch areas (doors, desks, computers, restrooms, sanctuary, student, and children's areas)
 - Training of children's ministry volunteers to follow cleaning protocols.
- Hand sanitizer stations will be located throughout the facility.

Bishop's Requirements

The Bishop has provided significant requirements on the procedures that churches in the Virginia conference are to follow in order that they may safely reopen. A summary of these requirements is in Appendix 1. St. Thomas is abiding by these requirements as it moves to reopen in phases.

APPENDIX 1

QUICK SUMMARY OF THE IN-PERSON WORSHIP SERVICE REQUIREMENTS

- It is strongly encouraged that those who want to attend service will complete the Health Acknowledgement Form online as a way to register their intent and so there can be adequate planning for all involved. **This is the preferred method.**
- Complete the brief Health Acknowledgement Form on the website or download it, complete it, and either drop it off to the main office by Friday at noon, or bring it with you to service on Sunday. If you do not have email, please call the church and arrange to complete the form.
- Walk-ins on the day of the service may use the Entryway Health Acknowledgement process. An entryway version of the Health Acknowledgement Form can be found at www.vaumc.org/return. This form will be displayed as a large poster and posted at the main entrance for each in-person gathering. Persons entering must read the form, acknowledge that they can affirm 'yes' to all of the statements on it to a volunteer posted at the entry, and provide their name and contact information, which the volunteer will record and the church will keep. Persons will wait in line and remain socially distanced during this entry process. Persons who cannot affirm 'yes' to all the statements on the form will not be able to enter.
- On the day of the service, if you are sick from anything, please stay home
- Before you leave your home to attend the service, each attendee must:
 - Take his/her temperature. It must be less than 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit to attend worship
 - Bring your face covering and hand sanitizer
 - Be prepared to answer follow up questions about your health, if any
- Face coverings required from the time you leave your vehicle until you return to your vehicle to go home
- Strict physical distancing – six feet or more at all times
- Hymnals, Bibles, and all worship materials will be removed
- No choirs but music is encouraged.
- No Congregational Singing – congregation may hum or speak the words
- Digital bulletin will be available for all Stages. Paper bulletins will resume in Stage 3.
- Digital words for worship elements
- Limited nursery for infants and toddlers in Stage 2
- No Sunday School in Stages 1 and 2
- No coffee or fellowship time in Stages 1 and 2
- Limited restroom usage for churches in Stages 1 and 2
- No handshakes or hugging in Stages 1 and 2
- Drop-off only (offering) in Stages 1 and 2
- Communion (pre-packaged) beginning in Stage 2

APPENDIX 2

CHECKLIST FOR CHILDREN'S CLASSROOMS

Opening Checklist

- Disinfect tables, chairs, doorknobs, and light switches prior to opening.
- Look for symptoms of illness of any child upon entry to the classroom.
- Every child and adult volunteer **MUST** wash hands with soap and water for 20 seconds upon entering the room.
- Parents will wash hands or use hand sanitizer before and after signing in and out.
- Children must sit spaced apart appropriately at tables and chairs.
- Practice social distance as much as possible. No hugging or holding hands.
- No sharing of items that cannot be sanitized (playdough, crayons), and each child has a labeled box for their personal effects.

Closing Checklist

- Every large toy played with by a child must be wiped down with bleach water solution, sprayed with sanitizer, let air dry.
- Small toys are placed in a bleach water solution bucket to soak, drain, and let air dry.
- Sweep floors and carpet with the broom that is available in each room.
- Tables, chairs, doorknobs, and light switches sprayed with sanitizer.
- Stack all chairs against the wall, lift stools and trash cans up off the floor for cleaning crew.

APPENDIX 3

CHECKLIST FOR GENERAL GROUPS

Opening Checklist

- Disinfect tables, chairs, doorknobs, and light switches prior to opening the room.
- Set up the room so that participants may sit and interact with one another at least 6 feet spaced apart to maintain social distance guidelines.
- As guests arrive, verify that each guest has completed a health form and nothing has changed since time of completion. Ask if a temperature was taken and what it was (must be less than 100.4). If not, take the participant's temperature.
- Participants must wear a facemask at all times. Food and beverages are not to be served.
- Reminder -- no hugging or holding hands.
- No sharing of items that cannot be sanitized (pens, paper, etc.).

Closing Checklist

- Tables, chairs, doorknobs, and light switches sprayed with sanitizer and wiped down.
- Return room to the way it was before you arrived by stacking all chairs and tables against the wall, lift trash cans up off the floor for cleaning crew.
- Sign, date and return this form verifying that you have completed all tasks to the front office upon departure.

Name

Date

***Please return this completed Checklist to the Front Office
when your group is finished meeting. Thank you!***