



Resuming Care-Filled Worship During A Pandemic



Paul A. Adams Sr., Pastor

From the very beginning, Christian believers have gathered for worship, prayer, instruction, and “breaking bread” to remember Jesus, the One who called them into one Body, the Church. Less than two months after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the believers “were all together in one place” (Acts 2:1). In an early summary of what church life was like, Luke tells us that, “Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home, and ate their food with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46) .

For two millennia Christians have continued to gather, assured of the promise of Jesus that, “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20). We have gathered in small house churches and in soaring cathedrals; we have gathered in one-room chapels and multi- million-dollar facilities; we have met by trees on savannahs and in brush arbors in camp meetings; we have met secretly in underground gatherings and openly in rallies attracting thousands .

Until we could not meet safely.

The coronavirus pandemic has challenged Cornerstone Christian Ministries, as well as churches globally, to continue being the Church without gathering in person. Like CCM, many places have met that challenge by meeting online, live streaming worship, providing instructions for worship at home, and finding other ways to connect.

Now churches face another challenge. As states “re-open,” how will we resume worship gatherings in person while the pandemic is still with us?

A care-filled response to that challenge is much more than unlocking the church doors and inviting all to come, sit, sing, and greet one another as had been our custom. Therefore, it behooves our pastor, Paul A. Adams, Sr., and the Board of Directors, to implement an immediate plan of action to ensure everyone is protected.

Our Theological Foundations

Whatever the Church does in its gatherings and other ministries expresses our understanding of who God is, what it means to be disciples of Jesus, and how the Holy Spirit empowers us to be witnesses to what God intends for the world. In times of crisis, when we must address new and challenging practical concerns, our basic theological convictions still apply: love of God and neighbor; regard for human bodies and fellowship; worship and sacraments; inclusive hospitality that welcomes all and avoids stigmatizing others; and the beauty of God, the world, and human creativity.

LOVE

Jesus taught that love of God and love of every neighbor are two inseparable aspects of one great commandment for the people of God (Matthew 22:35 - 40). Our love for God and neighbor is a response to God's love for the world revealed in Jesus (John 3:16). Love motivates everything we do as disciples of Jesus Christ, including how we worship and fellowship with one another. Especially during times of crisis, faithful Christian worship expresses the fullness of the gospel, both what it requires (love of God, self, neighbor, and the world) and what it releases (love, joy, peace, forgiveness, and deliverance in all forms).

During this pandemic, love of neighbor requires careful planning. Because we love God, we want to offer worship that brings our absolute best. Because we love our neighbors, we want to do everything we can to make sure we bring no harm to anyone when we gather.

HUMAN BODIES AND FELLOWSHIP

Christians profess that God the Son is incarnate, God become flesh (John 1:14). As God came to the world in a fully human body, Christians relate to God through our bodies. Christians also understand ourselves as members of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27). Therefore, Christians have generally recognized the assembly where we gather as members of one body to be the foundation of our worship.

The body of believers gathered in one place is an important theme in the New Testament. Jesus gathered his disciples in an upper room for a meal together. After the resurrection, on the day of Pentecost, three thousand were baptized and joined with the followers of Jesus Christ. They then "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). These five signs - baptism, teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and the prayers - have been common Christian practices since the very beginning. This gathered body called itself a "fellowship."

During a pandemic, gathering requires a delicate balance as we Christians weigh our need for being together as people of all ages, infant through older adult, alongside our commitments not to harm our neighbors through accidental spread of disease. We affirm that Christians may find

different, faithful solutions to this dilemma so long as we do not endanger ourselves or others. We offer guidance for how we can gather in careful ways that can minimize the risks so that our bodies and our fellowship might flourish.

SACRAMENTAL LIFE

A myriad of our Christian communities' draw life from the practice of the sacraments in worship. The Church has long taught that the sacraments come from Jesus' commandments and promises to his disciples:

Matthew 28:19–20 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

Matthew 26:26–28 While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

Baptism initiates us into Christ and his living body, the Church. Holy Communion unites us in praise and thanksgiving to God for all God has done to save us, and it feeds us with the living presence of Jesus, crucified and risen. Christians long to gather again to celebrate the sacraments out of obedience and love for Jesus and each other even as we acknowledge the present need for careful planning.

INCLUSION

Jesus announced good news to people often excluded from the societies of his day. He welcomed young children, empowered women, healed the sick, and reached out to people with all kinds of physical, mental, and spiritual illnesses. His love excluded no one.

Yet now, for the sake of the common good, CCM will have to consider the number and the health status of people who can gather and worship safely in our church building and the Threston C. Roots Fellowship Hall. We lament the pain and difficulty of these limitations, and we look forward to the day when we no longer must maintain such physical distance from one another. We will do everything we can to include by other means those who may not freely gather in our places of worship.

BEAUTY

Christians profess the beauty of God that nourishes the human need for beauty. In the words of the King James Bible, Psalm 96:9 declares: “O Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.” When we find beauty in music, the visual arts, or dance, we often experience this as a feeling of awe that draws us more deeply to the worship of God. All our creative arts and music reflect the beautiful holiness of God.

Art and music take many forms requiring differing degrees of human skill and technical complexity. In a time of physical distancing, we must also learn to find beauty in silence and simplicity. Yet the need for attention to the beauty of worship remains as we seek fresh ways to express the beauty we know in God, in each other, and in the whole creation.

Benchmarks for Resuming Worship Gatherings of Various Sizes

In late April 2020, the White House with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Coronavirus Task Force issued a set of benchmarks to indicate when it would be safe to re-open various kinds of activities, and how many people could safely gather under specific distancing guidelines.

The benchmarks involve both state and local public health conditions and the readiness of states and local communities to provide testing, appropriate health care, and follow-up with people who may have been exposed to someone diagnosed with COVID-19.

BENCHMARKS FOR RESUMING PUBLIC GATHERINGS

Beginning Criteria	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
A clear downward trajectory in the number of reported symptoms, confirmed cases, and/or positive tests for COVID-19 for 2 CONSECUTIVE WEEKS	A clear downward trajectory in the number of reported symptoms, confirmed cases, and/or positive tests for COVID-19 for 2 MORE CONSECUTIVE WEEKS	An ongoing downward trajectory in the number of reported symptoms, confirmed cases, and/or positive tests for COVID-19.	An ongoing downward trajectory in the number of reported symptoms, confirmed cases, and/or positive tests for COVID-19.

***** Each benchmark must be satisfied before moving to the next level. Increases in reported cases mean a return to the previous level.**

These general guidelines apply at every level:

- **Stay at home if you are sick and self-quarantine if you think you have been exposed to someone with COVID-19.**
- **Wash your hands with soap and water or use hand sanitizer, especially after touching frequently used items or surfaces.**
- **Disinfect frequently used items and surfaces.**
- **Use cloth face coverings while in public.**
- **Children under 2, those with breathing problems, and those who are unable to remove a mask on their own should not wear face coverings.**

Faithful Basic Practices

Towards the end of March, CCM temporarily closed our doors for the sake of the common good, but the “CHURCH” was not closed. The Church is the body of Christ that includes saints throughout all time and space. We are “like living stones” being formed “into a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5) even when we cannot gather in person.

As we begin to resume worship gatherings, our commitments to love, embodiment, sacraments, inclusive hospitality, and beauty are unwavering. The context in which we now express these commitments, however, has changed dramatically. In this new environment, wisdom also calls us to pay attention to the best that medical science (through CDC guidance) can teach us.

And at this moment, medical science calls us to exercise certain limits. We can look at limits in a negative way.

CCM will move forward based on the recommendations provided by CDC on May 22, 2020. Our plan of action is based on the scientific-based evidence retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/22/politics/cdc-guidance-religious-worship/index.html>

"Consistent with the community's faith tradition, consider temporarily limiting the sharing of frequently touched objects that cannot be easily cleaned between persons, such as worship aids, prayer rugs, prayer books, hymnals, religious texts and other bulletins, books, shared cups, or other items received, passed or shared among congregants as part of services," the guidelines state."

As we continue to seek wisdom for how to love our neighbors and promote the well-being of all, it is important to use all the resources available to us:

- Guidance we find in scripture
- Guidance we learn through our Christian tradition
- Guidance provided by episcopal offices, and
- Guidance issued by the CDC along with federal, state

Getting Ready to Resume Worship Gatherings

Many congregations are now beginning to prepare to resume worship gatherings. Safety for all who gather with us requires care-filled work, including:

CREATING A COORDINATION TEAM

Cornerstone will create a “COVID-19 Task Force.” This coordination team must have the authority to guide the initial preparations, develop policies, and oversee the implementation of the adopted policies if COVID-19 remains a threat.

PREPARING THE BUILDING

Responsible planning will aim to ensure that all who come to worship gatherings are as safe as possible, with as few exposures to infection as possible.

Checklist for basic safety in our church and fellowship hall:

Thoroughly disinfect all high-touch surfaces (pews, tables, chairs, pulpit, worship implements, door handles, light switches, microphones, keyboards, etc.) using EPA approved disinfectants prior to and after any worship service or meetings occurring in indoor church facilities.

The CDC offers these guidelines for cleaning and disinfecting:

https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/pdf/Reopening_America_Guidance.pdf

Obtain and stock sufficient supplies of needed disinfectants for any activities that will be permitted indoors on church premises. Maintain stock constantly until the threat of COVID-19 is eliminated.

As needed, adjust the spaces where worship leaders and musicians do their work so that they are sufficiently physically distanced from the worshipping congregation and from one another.

Remove items used by several people or that are not easily disinfected, such as offering plates and hymnals. *(This means that the musician should make sure that all hymns are readily available via PowerPoint.)*

Ushers must be at their post on time and provide/identify seating for families that allows children more space for movement.

*** The CDC provides signage and templates to create your own:
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/print-resources.html?Sort=Date%3A%3Adesc>

The church-at-large can post signs to form everyone to:

- Maintain Safe Distancing
- Wear Face Coverings
- Entering and Exiting the Church
- COVID-19 Updates
- Wash and Disinfect Hands
- Maintain Physical Distancing in Restrooms

Provide wipes and sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol content, along with trash cans at all points of entry, at all restrooms, at all exits, and within reach of seating areas in case anyone should cough or sneeze or otherwise need additional disinfecting during the service.

PREPARING THE USHERS

CCM Ushers are to help people feel welcome and comfortable about entering the building. During the pandemic, their visibility is more important than ever before.

- They **MUST** wear face coverings.
- CCM Ushers will need to be trained to give effective and hospitable guidance regarding signage, seating, disinfection, and face coverings.
- Both greeters and ushers should avoid using elevated voices to lessen the risk of virus transmission (even through cloth face coverings).
- Ushers and greeters should have extra masks in individual bags to provide to members and visitors if needed.

PREPARING THE CONGREGATION

The pastor and his Administrative Assistant, Sis. Marian Summers will announce when the church is reopening.

One option for preparing Cornerstone may be a soft startup. In a soft startup, the Pastor may choose to limit attendance by inviting a representative number of volunteers who are not in any of the high-risk categories. Congregations should also prepare to welcome any persons who happen to seek entrance to gatherings. This may help the congregation test its capacity to practice appropriate safety measures.

This will give Pastor Adams and the Board of Directors a chance to do a trial run and to see if the team is following best practices for entry, worship, and exit practices, while ensuring the congregation fulfill its mission and express its values. Cornerstone will also provide clear information about whether or how we will monitor restrooms, changing rooms, families with small children, and people with special needs.

It is imperative that the Pastor and Board of Directors meet with the COVID-19 Team to ensure that ongoing goals are being met and the church is in full compliance with the state and city of Chester.

Planning Worship

PLANNING FOR BEAUTY

Beauty is fundamental for worship. It is especially important for us to consider beauty when so many things we have relied on in the past to foster our awareness of beauty may not be available to us for some time. Therefore, rather than focusing on what *cannot* be done at this time, it is essential that Cornerstone Christian Ministries continue to draw upon the diverse gifts of the congregation, including the gifts of children, to discover what *can* be done in worship to bless God and edify the church. This could be video, poetry, sculpture, painting, dance, fabric arts, audio-visual and graphic design - whatever can be offered that enlivens awareness of the beauty of God and God's creation.

PLANNING WITH LIMITS

The limits on typical worship practices during this pandemic are becoming more and more apparent. Cornerstone must be careful not to spread the coronavirus through breath. However, the virus does not substantially inhibit our congregants from offering vital and vibrant worship. They simply impinge on ways we have grown most accustomed to worship over time. After all, we do not have to sing, speak loudly, offer unison responses, or even be close to each other to worship "in spirit and in truth." We can look at the limits we have as barriers, blocking access to some of our familiar pathways. But we can also look at them as challenges which, with the Spirit's empowerment, may become a spring of creativity.

In simpler terms, Cornerstone must find strategic ways to shorten the amount of time that the congregation are housed together. There may still be a fivefold pattern of Entrance, Praise and Worship, Word and Response, Thanksgiving [and Communion], and Sending. Given a shortened service time, the value of each of these movements of our worship may become more pronounced, and the contribution of each to the whole much clearer.

The time of entrance could be accompanied by an extended prelude, or an invitation into contemplative silence, or a period for a devotional reflection.

We should continue to use individual microphones for all participants. The heads will be changed and cleaned weekly. (Prayer, Scripture, Worship Leaders, Praise Team Leaders)

Refrain from excessive movement (Standing for the scripture, walking around for offering).

HOLY COMMUNION

Holy Communion can be resumed in ways that honor both distance and intimacy. Whenever the sacrament is offered to us and the intention to receive is present, so is God's grace. The act of receiving Communion *will* require a moment of physical closeness; apart from that, Cornerstone need to keep the 6-foot rule at the forefront. If the congregation approaches the table by forming a line, CCM will need to place markers on the floor at 6-foot intervals as a guide. The ushers must instruct those in line to wait at each marker for the person (or family) in front of them to

move to the next marker. This applies both to coming to receive and returning to a seat. Ushers may facilitate the movement, while also maintaining proper distance.

CCM will begin using the pre-packaged communion cup and cracker. Individuals who struggle to open the contents can be assisted by the ushers.

Hand sanitizer will be made available at all stations.

The congregation will refrain from saying aloud the liturgical responses or unison prayers, as this creates aerosols in the atmosphere.

EXITING

Throughout history, the sign of peace has taken on many forms - a kiss, a handshake, a hug. This sign of “reconciliation and love” includes both word and gesture as worshippers receive and extend to one another the gift of Christ’s peace.

For the time being, CCM will adopt the following policies:

- Air Hugs
- A gentle nod, or even a deep, reverent bow toward one another
- A simple wave to one another

STAYING CONNECTED

Relationship is key to the gospel and to what it means to be the Church. Cornerstone Christian Ministries have employed technology as a great means of staying connected. Through live streaming, Facebook Live, and pre-recorded videos, CCM has opened the flood gates to ensure that the members and the community-at-large when health, physical distancing guidelines, and/or underlying conditions prevented in-person fellowship. The church has used technology in creative ways to help build new relationships and strengthen existing small groups and larger worshipping communities.

And as the ability to meet in small groups resumes, though with some limitations such as distancing, cloth face coverings, and no or limited shared food, online means will remain critical ways to stay connected, especially for those who are at higher risk for severe illness.

As Cornerstone Christian Ministries stand in this place of needing both physical and technological means to support fellowship, it is recommended:

- Connecting the people in worship gatherings with people in online-only services as intentional prayer partners or people on whose welfare they check.
- Using the Conference Free number for corporate prayer.
- Continue to provide food services for those in need.