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How To Worship During A Pandemic

Arkansas Churches Share Their Reopening Strategies During COVID

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When the first confirmed case of COVID-19 appeared in Arkansas on March 11, 2020, churches across the Arkansas Conference, and Arkansans in general, wondered how this would change the way we worshipped for the next few weeks. Many of us never dreamed that this pandemic would last for the majority of 2020 and that the way we were having to worship in March would be the new normal for Methodist Churches for the foreseeable future.

Bishop Gary Mueller and the Arkansas Conference Cabinet issued guidelines soon after statewide guidance was issued by Gov. Asa Hutchinson, and in the past 7 months, the Conference has consistently put out updated guidelines to ensure our churches are able to reopen safely and effectively.

In our current Stage 2.5 guidelines, churches are allowed to hold in-person worship services with a limited number of people, based on the size of their sanctuaries. Additionally, sanitization, masks, and distancing guidelines are still in effect.

And although many churches have decided to resume in-person worship, others have moved more slowly to reopen again. For some, totally virtual worship services have become the norm, and continue to be an effective way to worship together. Still others find virtual worship to be difficult to manage, or they are in more rural areas of the state where internet access is unavailable or shoddy at best.



The sanctuary during traditional worship at First UMC Mountain Home.

“We were already streaming before this all hit, so when we closed, the staff only led one blended service every Sunday, which we streamed. We had previously been doing one contemporary service and one traditional service,” said Laura Law, Director of Communications for First UMC Mountain Home.

For First Mountain Home, the transition was easy, and they were able to adapt and expand on their already existing online service.

Law said they pushed even more for online giving and added a drop box outside the church for anyone who wanted to write a check or donate cash.

Eventually, Law said they opened up a contemporary parking lot worship service where worshippers could tune into a radio transmission and listen in their cars.

But after careful consideration, the church decided to resume in-person worship services on June 28. Law said having two worship spaces at the church, their main sanctuary and a contemporary worship center, allowed for them to have two worship opportunities on Sunday morning without having to clean the spaces between services.

“We started back both services at a limited capacity and with social distancing restrictions and brought back a limited team to join our staff in leading worship,” Law said. “We also asked folks to register for in-person worship online, for contact tracing and to control numbers.”



The sanctuary at St. James UMC Little Rock during traditional worship.



The production team at St. James UMC Little Rock oversees audio, lighting, and live streaming during St. James' traditional worship service.

St. James UMC in Little Rock, one of the largest churches in the Arkansas Conference, was also prepared to transition to online services when COVID hit, but only recently opened up their worship spaces to in-person worship on Sept. 20.

"A lot of things led to that decision," said the Rev. Claire Caldwell, associate pastor at St. James.

Caldwell said they first started a Relaunch Task Force made up of lay members, staff, and clergy at St. James. The task force came to the agreement that they wanted to resume in-person worship, but only if all of the guidelines from the CDC, Arkansas Department of Health, Arkansas Governor, and ARUMC COVID Stages were considered.

St. James now has two services, one traditional at 9 a.m. and one contemporary at 11:15, with both services limited to 50 or fewer people. Caldwell said they require people to sign up for one of the services online in order to limit the number of people inside, and they also strictly stick to safety precautions issued by health experts.

"Everyone that attends services must wear a mask, is screened at the door, is seated by an usher so that social distancing can be maintained, and we ask people to park using every other space in the parking lot. We are exiting the worship spaces row by row, and not congregating in the hallway or outside," Caldwell explained.

In the Southwest District, the Rev. David Moore — senior pastor of Asbury UMC in Magnolia and McNeil UMC — started live streaming the Asbury worship service on the church's Facebook Page when the pandemic hit. Moore said the McNeil congregation,

which is much smaller and more rural than Asbury, tuned into the live streaming service as well.

“Within a couple of weeks, we moved outside to the big parking lot and offered a parking lot worship service while still streaming the service. Our attendance was great using both methods,” Moore said.

Asbury then transitioned to in-person services on July 5, with a 35-minute service and a maximum of 45 people, but continued to offer live streaming and the parking lot option for those who were cautious to worship inside the church.

Moore said that the Center for Communication and Methodist Foundation for Arkansas grant helped them to purchase a better camera for their live streaming, and they were also able to purchase a small band FM transmitter so people in the parking lot could hear the worship service.

According to Caldwell and Moore, the response has been generally positive, but they still have many people who are anxious to resume in-person activities and worship in a larger capacity.



Asbury UMC in Magnolia holds a parking lot service for their members to safely worship together.

“Some people were ready to be back in worship, others are not yet ready. A few of our services have been at a capacity of 50, but not every service. So we will continue to offer in-person and online services,” Caldwell said.

Law said that First Mountain Home’s congregation has been very supportive and thankful for the church’s careful reopening strategy. Before reopening, The Reopening Task Force

sent out a survey to gauge people's thoughts on which strategy they felt worked best for their church.

"That was very much appreciated," she said.

Regardless of which strategy a church chooses for reopening, many will notice that not everyone will feel comfortable returning to in-person worship just yet. But maintaining a clean and sanitary environment for those who do decide to come back is a key component of keeping everyone safe in the long term.

"It is impossible to predict how long this pandemic will last, if the virus will change, or if infection rates will continue to rise. Our goal is to provide a safe, healthy environment for all using reasonable measures and with the best interests of the church as a whole in mind," Caldwell said.

If you're curious about the current safety guidelines issued by the Bishop and Cabinet, visit <https://arumc.org/covid19/safe-church-reopening-guidance/>. This page is continually updated to reflect the most recent recommendations issued by the state of Arkansas and the CDC.

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