

Regathering FAQs: (last edited on July 6th. Note: new questions will be added to the top of the document as they arise)

What were the guiding principles of the Taskforce?

The following guiding principles of the taskforce were developed by a sub-team of Classis East*:

Principle 1: The Church is not closed. We are still the body of Christ. We are still active as God's people at work in God's world.

Principle 2: As God's people in God's world, we are called to love God and to love our neighbor.

Principle 3: It is out of our love for our neighbor, especially those most vulnerable among us, that we must "go slowly" in terms of regathering for in-person worship.

Principle 4: As God's people, we are called to "Respect the Authorities" in our land.

Principle 5: All scientific and medical authorities tell us that this virus will be with us for some time. Therefore, any plans made for "when" to begin worshipping in person, and "how" to conduct this in-person worship must take into account "the long view."

Principle 6: All plans must be flexible. We do not know the course of this pandemic. Things may improve, but things may also worsen.

Principle 7: In all things, and through all times, we are called to move forward together as God's people who strive to be "one in Spirit and one in mind."

**the group of geographically close churches that are all part of the Christian Reformed Church denomination, of which we are a member).*

Who comprised the task force?

Elder Rachel VerWys (chair; Ford); Tala Sakala (Ford); Ray Russell (Ford); Pastor Paula Seales (Square); Anding Shen (Square) Pastor Kristi Lewis (Square); Rachel Chung (Square); Judi Meerman (North); Barry Meerman (North); Kathi Vande Gutche (North); Stephanie Kammeraad (North); Pastor Joy Bonnema (All-Site and North).

What kind of resources were used in their decision-making?

A team representative attended a weekly zoom call of the Kent County COVID-19 Church Task Force hosted by Khary Bridgewater from the Urban Church Leadership Center and Thriving Congregations (part of GR Theological Seminary). Khary is on a working group established by the governor's office to help provide churches with reopening guidelines when the time comes. This call always had a Public Health Official provide an update, and through Mr. Bridgewater there is a direct connection to the state's process of developing recommendations for churches. In addition, members of the committee used resources related to their workplaces or their areas of expertise. The current guidelines provided by the CDC, the State of MI and the Kent County Health Department have contributed to and guide our phase in recommendations.

Why are we not gathering while other congregations are?

Very early on, the All Site Council unanimously agreed that we would not move faster than Public Health recommendations including those gathering limitations ordered by our governor. While we acknowledge that Churches are not legally bound to these limitations, we agreed that the wisdom used to create them was appropriate for us to adhere to. We are also in alignment with our area of geographically located CRC churches, Classis East, together we are proceeding with caution and share our guidelines with one another. In addition, the taskforce recognizes that the 49507 and 49503 zip codes were the hardest hit zip codes in Kent County.

There is much still unknown about the virus, but it has become increasingly clear that it is more often transmitted through aerosol droplets emitted through speaking or singing, especially when in long-term contact with infected people in an indoor setting. This makes a worship setting particularly a vulnerable place to be. There have been several examples where Covid spread within a congregation because of a worship experience.

We are aware that some local congregations have begun to gather. Some have chosen to do an outdoor service, have multiple services to accommodate their congregations, or because they have large worship spaces that can better accommodate their congregations. The restrictions determined by our governor are not enforced on houses of worship, and they are within their rights to gather.

However, it's important to note that many aspects of our gathering as a beloved community inherently involve behavior that pose transmission risks. It's way too easy to justify giving someone a hug that you haven't seen in person in many months, or want to sing loudly (and that pesky mask just gets in the way). Because our local health department is strongly advising us not to gather, we are adhering to that advice.

Why can't we just meet outdoors?

We can! Small groups are gathering outside in parks and backyards practicing social distancing. But, there are still issues for large gatherings of access to restrooms, portable sound systems, limits to the number that can gather, the weather (needing shade or the possibility of rain), the need to still be virtual for those that won't or can't join, and other important logistics. The Square site doesn't have a parking lot big enough and the other sites meet at schools that are currently closed. And, there is also a recognition of the risks mentioned above in gathering.

What happens when we get the green light to have more people meet indoors?

The representatives of each site will be working through the issues specific to their location to determine gathering parameters. No matter what, we will still be having to account for riskier behavior such as singing, hugging, passing the offering, doing communion...a lot of the things that define our worship time together.

What about our buildings being used for things other than worship?

Staff (and volunteer leaders) are permitted to use Madison Place, the office, and the various spaces at the Square site campus as long as we stay in line with the guidelines brought by the task force. Those guidelines include (but aren't limited to):

1. Reservations must be made through the office for any use of the buildings.
2. There must be 10 or fewer people using that space (or whatever the current guidelines are)
3. Everyone must fill out a health survey before entering the building, so we have record of their use (helpful for contact tracing, for example.)
4. Must wear masks when within 6 feet of others or when entering/leaving and walking through the building.

What about access to online connections and services?

All Madison sites will continue to use online technology to share Sunday services as well as other prayer or small group gatherings. We know some people may have barriers to accessing this technology. If you are experiencing a barrier to accessing the online connections please reach out to your leadership team so we can connect with you in other ways or address the barriers.

What about recording of singing for worship?

There are special guidelines regarding video-recording of singers for worship-recordings that will be communicated to those in the worship department.

What about reservations for our spaces from outside groups?

Council also voted that we cancel all current reservations of outside use of Madison Place and Madison Square for the month of July and that we don't book additional outside reservations until more clarity is received from public health officials. We do not anticipate opening reservations to outside groups until we enter into Phase 5.