

Dear Petra Family,

I have some good news! On Sunday morning, May 24, we will be starting church services on site for those who feel comfortable venturing out. The service times are 9 and 11 a.m. We will be opening in phases, adding more ministry as we go. There will be no Café or Children's Ministry in this opening phase.

Q & A Responses

1. Are churches allowed to meet during this time?

Actually, churches have always been allowed to meet. Early on, the governor listed churches in the "Essential" category that could remain open. There never was a mandate for churches to close or remain closed. That is a public misconception. Most churches voluntarily closed their on-site gatherings for a period of time, which we felt was the right thing to do. Our local representative clarified that the red, yellow, and green phases do not apply to churches as to when they can open. An attorney from the PA Family Institute confirms that we are able to meet, and the governor himself in a recent address also verified several times that churches are essential and can meet. There are some social distancing guidelines we have been asked to follow when we meet, which we will try to do.

2. Why are churches considered essential?

Churches are essential to the overall health of the community. They provide ministry to the spiritual, mental, and emotional needs of people, which is of critical importance in a crisis. We are hearing and seeing the emotional and spiritual effects that come from prolonged isolation, business shutdowns, unemployment, family stress, inability to fully grieve and bring closure surrounding the death of loved ones, discouragement, depression, a spike in addiction, and people struggling with suicidal thoughts. The church is the best entity in the community to deal with these things. Being able to meet with people and worship together is important to our wellbeing and to community health and stability, especially in times like this.

3. Are other churches in our area opening?

Yes, quite a few churches in New Holland and in the county are planning on opening around the same time as we are. A number of Hopewell Network churches are opening as well, and some have already opened.

4. Are there any guidelines we need to follow to protect the health of those who attend? What protocols will the church use? What can I expect when I walk into the service?

We will do our best to provide a safe, clean environment where you can have a touch-free experience. Doors will be opened for you, and there will be no bulletins, no greeting time, and no passing of the offering containers. We are advising to refrain from hugs and handshakes.

We will encourage social distancing as much as possible. Please respect others who might feel more strongly than you about social distancing. Some have very good reasons for doing so that you might not be aware of. This fosters a culture of honor.

We will seat people in every other row and ask to keep a two-seat separation between family groups or non-family members. You will be able to sit together with your family.

We will do enhanced cleaning before and after each service of door handles, restrooms, countertops, headsets, etc.

5. What if I have a cough or a family member feels sick? What if I was exposed to someone who may have the COVID-19 virus, but I am feeling OK?

STAY HOME PLEASE! This is a serious time. We want anyone who has a cough or feels sick to stay home – even if you don't have a fever with your illness. Please respect your church family by staying home. This includes if you were around anyone in the last 14 days who is suspected of having – or has been diagnosed with – the COVID-19 virus.

6. Are we required to wear face masks?

The Secretary of Health said it is not a requirement for those attending a church service, but it is recommended. Since it is not required, we are making wearing face masks optional. We are asking people to take personal responsibility for their safety and that of their children. We expect that some will feel more comfortable wearing a mask. People wear face masks for various reasons. They might have an underlying health issue, or they might want to protect other vulnerable people around them. These are good reasons to wear a mask. You might want to consider bringing a mask to use in close quarters, such as in a restroom or hallways. If you do not feel comfortable being in an environment where some people are not wearing masks, you might want to stay at home a while longer. We will be asking our prayer ministers to wear masks for personal prayer ministry.

7. Will there be any Children's Ministry provided in phase one?

There will be no Children's Ministry or Nursery available at this time, but you are welcome to bring your children along to sit with you. Parents are encouraged to bring some activities for their children to engage in during the service. We know the little ones like to run and play, but during phase one we are asking parents to keep their young children by their side. Also, the Children's Library and Adult Library are closed at this time.

8. What about those who choose not to attend the service yet?

It is perfectly OK to not attend on-site services right away. We realize people have different things they must weigh in determining if this is the right time to attend an on-site service. Some should not be attending at this time. This is just an option for those who are able and desiring to get together with their church family.

We will continue all our online services as we have been and stay focused on bringing ongoing, quality ministry to those at home. Regional Care Ministers will stay engaged with those sheltered at home. There is no pressure for people to return to our on-site services until they feel totally comfortable.

9. What about those in high-risk groups?

We are asking those at high risk not to attend at this time. Use your good judgement as to when you feel it is safe for you. We do not want you to put yourself at risk.

10. When will the youth be able to meet?

We are still trying to figure that out. It is hard to maintain social distancing for youth who like to hang out together. For now, we will continue with the online youth ministry.

11. Does anything change with the office or church staff in this phase?

Office hours are the same. We will probably keep operating as we have been the past number of weeks, with some staff working remotely and a lot of ZOOM meetings for continued social distancing.