

# Oxford United Methodist Church

## Infectious Disease Response Plan

Authored March 3, 2020

Revision 1.0

## Introduction

This Infectious Disease Response Plan is the work of the Oxford United Methodist Church's Church Council. In the same way that Safe Gatherings protects our most vulnerable populations from abuse, the Infectious Disease Response Plan has the health and safety of all our members at its core. The vision for this plan is to create hygienic church facilities that promote a healthy environment where all attendees feel safe to worship.

## Infectious Disease (Cold and Flu) Season

For the purposes of this plan, we will define the infectious disease season as beginning with the first service of the Advent season and lasting through the completion of Good Friday services. These dates roughly correspond to the cold and flu season in San Antonio, and, by basing our definition on the liturgical calendar, we make it easier for our members to know, based on that calendar, what disease prevention measures are in place.

## Threat Levels

Throughout this plan, different steps may be taken based on the threat of infectious disease. Whenever such is the case, this plan will highlight the steps to be taken at each level. To promote a shared understanding of those levels, the following are definitions of those levels:

Level 0	Level 0 is the "steady state" of the church. It represents a normal level of viral activity. This is the lowest alert state.
Level 1	Level 1 is an elevated state of vigilance, and the church will automatically enter into this state during the infectious disease season.
Level 2	Level 2 is the highest state of vigilance, and it represents a localized infectious disease threat that merits the highest level of precaution.

The threat level raises automatically from 0 to 1 during the infectious disease season with no one's action.

The threat level can be raised to any level at any time by the action of the pastor for a defined time period of seven (7) calendar days. It can be raised to any level at any time by the Church Council for a longer defined period of time by Church Council action. No other entities have the right or privilege to change the church's infectious disease threat level.

### Lowering the Threat Level

**Once the threat level has been raised by the pastor, it cannot be lowered except through the action of the Church Council or the expiration of the seven (7) calendar day period. Once the threat action has been raised by Church Council action, it cannot be lowered except through the action of the Church Council or the expiration of the action that established the raised threat level.**

### Raising the Threat Level for Specific Activities

For specific activities, the pastor or Church Council can raise the threat level for only that activity, particularly if an infectious disease threat is higher for that activity, while leaving the threat level for

other activities unchanged. However, for consistent understanding, this plan directs that a strong preference should be shown for raising the threat level evenly across all activities.

If the threat level is raised only for a particular activity or activities, the same restrictions apply for the raising or lowering of the threat level for that activity as they would for an overall threat level increase.

Again, the intent of this provision is to provide flexibility to respond to unique types of infectious disease. This provision is *not* intended to in any way circumvent responsible infectious disease response.

## Food Safety

At all times, this plan places an emphasis on the proper sanitization of hands before eating or preparing food. **Whenever practical and practicable, hand washing with soap and water shall be preferred over hand sanitizers.** The importance of handwashing, and the preference for soap-and-water, is applicable to *everyone*. It applies to employees, church members, and attendees.

### Hand Washing

To wash hands properly, rub your hands together underneath a known clean water source (i. e. a sink faucet). Once the hands are wet, turn the faucet off and apply soap. Rub the hands together, making sure to create a lather that reaches in-between fingers, under the nails, and the back of the hands. Scrub for at least 20 seconds. If you are unsure how long this is, sing the “Happy Birthday” song twice. Once your hands have been appropriately scrubbed, rinse off the later with water.

### Hand Sanitization with Hand Sanitizers

To sanitize your hands properly using a hand sanitizer, dispense the sanitizer into your palm by pressing the pump down completely. Rub your hands together, making sure that the sanitizer reaches all surfaces of your hands, including in between your fingers, under your fingernails, and onto the backs of your hands. Rub the hands together until the sanitizer has been completely absorbed and your hands are completely dry.

## Food Preparation and Clean-up

### Cleaning Hands for Food Preparation

**With the exception of Communion, hand washing with soap and water is the *only* acceptable method of sanitation for food preparation.** Hand sanitizer is *not* acceptable as a substitute for cleansing the hands for the purposes of food prep. Hand washing is required at *all* threat levels.

### Food Safety Certification

It is the strong preference of this plan that *all* who prepare food in the church kitchen receive regular annual training refreshers on proper food safety techniques. This training may be done online or in-person, as appropriate.

### Use of Sponges and Scrubbers

Sponges and scrubbers with sponges attached are difficult to disinfect. Their use is discouraged but tolerated at a Level 0 threat level. At Level 2, such sponges and scrubbers must be disposed of immediately after clean-up for the event. At Level 3, the use of sponges and scrubbers is forbidden.

## Serving Food

At all events, and at all threat levels, it shall be our preference to have servers with hands sanitized with soap-and-water serving the food. Serving utensils shall be used whenever possible, and servers should use gloves approved for the purposes of food service whenever it is impossible to use utensils.

## General Requirements

At all threat levels, including Level 0, hand sanitizer should be placed at the beginning of the server line, and those consuming food should be encouraged to use it. A sign placed near the sanitizer accomplishes this purpose.

At a Level 3, any events at which food is served or available must be approved by the Church Council in advance of the event. Without approval of the Church Council, no food may be made available except in the event of a medical emergency (i. e. to provide food to a diabetic).

## Narthex Refreshments

At all threat levels, including Level 0, two bottles of hand sanitizer shall be available at all times. One shall be placed on the table with the refreshments, and one shall be placed near the coffee/tea supplies. Signs shall be placed near each bottle, encouraging those consuming the refreshments to sanitize before consuming.

At a Level 2 threat level, we will change the fruit types available to those that must be peeled in order to be consumed (i. e. oranges, bananas). Fruits such as apples, that are consumed with their skin, will not be served. This is intended to reduce the risk posed when an attendee intentionally or inadvertently touches another piece of fruit while searching for the perfect one.

At a Level 3 threat level, we will discontinue the use of all snacks and refreshments that are not pre-packaged. Bottled water, bottled tea, and other such bottled refreshments may be provided as replacement drink refreshments.

## Snacks at Sunday School/Children's Church

Due to the often-increased risk posed to children by various infectious disease, it shall be the preference to serve individually-packaged snacks for all children who have not yet reached the age for promotion into the youth group.

Children shall be encouraged to clean their hands immediately prior to consuming snacks. Hand washing with soap-and-water is still preferred, but hand sanitizer may be used.

## Potlucks

Potlucks present a particular problem, as much of the food is prepared outside of our church kitchen . . . and attendees often serve themselves. Recognizing the long history of Methodist potlucks, this plan does *not* seek to eliminate them.

However, potlucks are expressly forbidden at a Level 2 threat level.

At Levels 0 and 1, hand sanitizer along with a sign encouraging its use shall be placed on the table near the food. Church-provided serving utensils should be used whenever practical and practicable.

## Communion

For the purposes of this plan, we will define three different ways of performing Communion:

1. *Intinction*, where a piece of wafer or bread is dipped into the juice and consumed at the same time.
2. *Serving trays*, where attendees take an individual cup (either plastic or glass) of juice from a serving tray
3. *Disposable cups*, where both the wafer and the juice are in a sealed, disposable cup.

This plan makes no comment on the ceremonial or symbolic value of a particular form of Communion, but we do believe that the above list is ordered from the least sanitary practice to the most sanitary.

For the purposes of this section, we will refer to a communicant. A *communicant* is an individual receiving Communion.

### Sick or Infirm Individuals

At all threat levels, those who are sick should be actively discouraged from taking Communion via both the intinction or serving tray methods, as their proximity to either the bread or the juice could contaminate it for other communicants. This discouragement can take the form of an announcement during the administration of Communion:

*If you are feeling sick today, we don't want you to sit out Communion. We'd still love for you to participate. Please approach one of the Communion serving lines from the side. One of our servers will get a disposable Communion cup and bring it over to you. Hold your hands in a cup so that the server can drop the cup into your hands.*

### Hand Sanitizer

The pastor and all Communion servers must sanitize their hands prior to administering Communion. The preference for hand washing with soap-and-water is maintained, but such a preference is often not practical in the context of a Communion service. As such, the use of hand sanitizer is permissible in this instance.

The pastor and the Communion servers should take care to perform this sanitization in front of the communicants so that all communicants know that they will be served with clean hands.

This plan also encourages the use of hand sanitizer at all threat levels and for all communicants as the first stop in the Communion serving line. This sanitizes the communicant's hands immediately prior to receiving Communion, thereby reducing the chance that the communicant re-exposes their hands to germs or bacteria by touching their face.

### Intinction

Intinction has many potential points for germ exposure for communicants. As such, it is expressly forbidden as a method of administering Communion at Level 2.

At other levels, it is crucial that servers be properly trained before administering Communion. That training shall consist of reading the entire Communion section of this document as well as having the Worship Chair or his or her designee demonstrate, in person, the proper administration.

## Hand Sanitizer

Because of the heightened potential for germ exposure when using the intinction method, hand sanitizer must be used at all threat levels, and it must be pumped by a server into a communicant's hands as they reach the serving line. This insures that every communicant has received hand sanitizer.

Communicants with allergies to hand sanitizers can choose another Communion method.

## Bread

When serving the bread, the Communion server will tear a piece off of the loaf and drop it into the communicant's cupped hands. This means that only one person's hands – the server's – touches the bread, thereby avoiding having every communicant touch the bread. **Communicants may not tear off their own piece of bread from the loaf.**

## Juice

Efforts should be made to avoid the communicant "dunking" the bread into the juice. As such, the server should raise or lower the cup so that the liquid inside is easily visible to the communicant, and the server should hold the cup as steady as possible while the communicant dips the bread into the juice. For young children taking Communion, this will likely mean that the server will be stooping or squatting significantly. If stooping or squatting actions are not possible for the server, the server should make such known to the Worship Chair so that the chair can arrange for the server to serve the bread.

During Level 1 threat levels, the use of a shallow dish to hold the juice may be considered, as it further reduces the risk of a communicant dunking the bread into the juice.

## Serving Trays

Serving trays offers some advantages over intinction in that it eliminates the use of a semi-shared cup. However, it does not completely eliminate the risk of contamination, as an infected individual can easily inadvertently touch another cup or cups if the communicant is allowed to self-select a cup. Again, proper server training is important to reduce spreading infection.

## Hand Sanitizer

Hand sanitizer is once again recommended to reduce germ exposure. It must be used at all threat levels, and it should once again be pumped into the communicant's hands by a server to assure that every communicant receives hand sanitizer.

## Bread

When serving the bread, the same procedure applies: the server will tear off a piece of bread off of the loaf and drop it into the communicant's cupped hands. Again, this is to insure that only one person's hands – the hands of the server – touches the bread.

## Juice

Dunking is eliminated as a concern here, but care should still be taken to avoid the communicant from bumping into other cups. If possible, the server should hold the tray with one hand while carefully pulling a cup from the tray with another. The cup can then be presented to the communicant in such a way that the communicant can grab the cup from the bottom. This likely takes practice before the Communion service to do this effectively.

As an alternative to a rehearsed server, communicants can select their own cup from the tray. This is less sanitary due to the risk of the communicant accidentally touching other cups as a cup is selected. To minimize the risk, the server should rotate the tray so that it is easy for the communicant to understand which cup is his/hers.

### Disposable Cups

This plan considers to be this method of Communion as the most sanitary, and it is mandated for Communions administered while at a Level 2 threat level. Proper serving technique is still essential, though, to reduce the chance of spreading infection.

### Hand Sanitizer

Hand sanitizer should still be used by communicants when taking Communion via a disposable cup. While the use of hand sanitizer helps to prevent a person from spreading disease in the other methods of Communion, it also serves to reduce the risk that the communicant will himself/herself become infected from any germs on his/her hand. As a result, hand sanitizer is still important for disposable cups.

### Serving the Cups

When serving the disposable cups, it is important that the server's hands be sanitized. This is to prevent spreading any germs on the server's hands to the cups.

Similarly, communicants should not be encouraged to reach into any basket or plate to retrieve their own cup. Communicants should be encouraged to approach the server with cupped hands, and the server should drop the disposable cup into the communicant's hands. This once again means that only a single person's hands – the hands of the server – are in or near the serving vessel.

### Solemn Duty for Communion Servers

Communion servers typically understand that their efforts are a solemn duty. However, those efforts *include* the prevention of the spread of infectious diseases.

**If you are symptomatic in *any way*, please notify the Worship Chair immediately, and do *not* serve Communion.** If you have had the flu, do not serve Communion until a week after your temperature has dropped and stayed below 100 degrees. If you have had a cold, do not serve Communion for two weeks. In short, if you have the least bit of doubt as to your physical condition, notify the Worship Chair so that someone else can take your place. **Do not risk infecting others!** Many viruses that are minor inconveniences to most can be life-threatening to some communicants.

Should you run into a situation that contaminates your hands, set down the Communion element on the Communion table and re-apply hand sanitizer. Such events might be steadying a communicant that was falling, scratching one's own face, or having a communicant touch your hand. When in doubt, sanitize!

If a Communion element is potentially contaminated – for example, from a communicant sneezing on the bread – discontinue its use. There is typically enough elements in the other serving line to provide for all communicants.

### Modifications to Ministries

Infectious diseases also mean modifications to certain ministries in the church:

## Ushers

When the threat level increases to Level 1 or 2, ushers should make every effort to open both the exterior and interior doors for service attendees. This is to minimize contact for attendees to a frequently-touched surface (a door handle). Similarly, ushers should watch the two center sanctuary doors for attendees exiting the sanctuary during service (i. e. to use the restroom). When this happens, ushers should open the door for the attendee.

## Offerings

Passing the offering plate can also be a potential point of infection, as many hands touch the offering plate. When the threat level increases to Level 2, the offering plate will no longer be passed. Instead, ushers shall position themselves at the front of the building, and service attendees will come forward individually to place their offerings into the offering plate.

Prior to collecting the offering, ushers will wipe the rim of the offering plate with a disinfectant wipe, and they will then sanitize their hands using at least hand sanitizer.

The leader of the service shall also make mentions of the opportunities that are provided for online giving such that attendees need not even approach the offering plate.

## Passing the Peace and Shalom

When the threat level is at Level 1 or 2, a steady supply of hand sanitizer should be kept in the hymnal racks on the backs of the pews. Attendees should be reminded that hand sanitizer exists there for this purpose. Many people do not use hand sanitizer after shaking hands, for fear that it is insulting to the person whose hands they shook, implying that that person does not maintain clean hands. Instituting it as a church practice minimizes such awkwardness.

A verbal announcement should be made from the platform at the start of the Infectious Disease Season. After that, a short, one-line reminder immediately beneath these parts of the service is sufficient to serve as a reminder.

## Janitorial

Whenever the threat level is at Level 1 or 2, trash cans should be placed near the exit to every church restroom designed for more than one occupant. This is to allow an individual using the restroom to open the door with a paper towel, and to then easily dispose of the paper towel in the can near the door. Paper towels do *not* need to be placed near the door, but should be in steady supply within the restroom itself.

A steady supply of hand soap should be present at *all* church restrooms at any threat level.

## Stephen Ministry

In the event of an increase to Level 2, it is highly likely that the disease prompting the increase is leading to severe illness and death. The Stephen Ministry is encouraged to keep themselves healthy so that the ministry can continue throughout the outbreak. As a result, it is highly recommended that the Stephen Ministry provide their services only through telephone calls or internet video chats at a Level 2 threat level.

## Personal Protective Equipment

The church shall make every reasonable effort to protect its ministers and ministries throughout any infectious outbreak. As such, N95 masks or any similar future technology should be kept on-hand in sufficient quantities to enable our pastors to do their work safely.

Ministers travelling on behalf of the church, i. e. to make house calls or hospital visits, should be provided with any other reasonable equipment or supplies, with appropriate budget consideration. For example, pastors should be supplied with small bottles of hand sanitizer to keep in their vehicles for use before and after visits.

## Government Quarantines

In the event of a quarantine by local, state, or federal officials for the area in which Oxford is located, in-person services will be automatically cancelled. “Do not enter” notices with information about the quarantine will be placed on the doors along with any information about online services. Doors will be locked to discourage entry.

Such closings will apply to all ministries of the church (food pantry, MDO, etc.).

## Closings Due to “Critical Mass” Infections

In other instances, an outbreak may reach a “critical mass” of infections where an in-person meeting may put our members and service attendees at risk. Larger gatherings like a church service may put vulnerable members at risk, as those members may feel obligated to attend services if the church is open.

When infection is widespread enough in the city and surrounding areas so as to cause concern – regardless of whether a quarantine has been issued for the area surrounding Oxford – the pastor shall have the right and the obligation to cancel in-person services.

In the event that the pastor is unavailable or incapacitated (i. e. from being infected), the Church Council Chair shall decide whether or not in-person services will be held.

Again, notices shall be placed on the doors along with any information about online services.

Such closings will apply to all ministries of the church (food pantry, MDO, etc.) as deemed prudent by the pastor or the Church Council Chair.

## Online Services

Oxford has a unique and special capacity to be able to deliver services when quarantines or church closures are in effect. Provided that the direction of local, state, or federal officials does not prohibit it, a skeleton crew may run an online service, but only if the pastor or the Church Council chair (if the pastor is unavailable or incapacitated) deems it reasonable safe to do so.

## Traditional

For the Traditional service, this skeleton crew will consist of the pastor, the lay leader, and the music minister as well as audio-visual team members. The choir may not be a part of the skeleton crew so as to keep the appropriate distance between the crew members.

## Elevate

For the Elevate service, the skeleton crew will consist of the pastor, the music minister, and the Elevate praise band, along with audio-visual team members. A reduction of singers may be necessary to maintain required spacing.

## Spacing

For most infectious diseases, a minimum distance of three feet should be maintained in order to prevent the spread of infection. This may mean that individuals need to spread out – or that the numbers of the skeleton crew may need to be reduced – in order to maintain the proper spacing.

## Illness of Key Employees

All church committees should make efforts to document their processes so that the church is not reliant upon a single individual.

Further, for church office staff, every staff member is directed to consider how his/her work could be accomplished remotely. When the threat level is raised to Level 1, the employee should review his/her remote work plans. At Level 2, it is highly likely that employees may be asked to work from home to help prevent the spread of infection.

At all times, the church supports work-from-home for individuals who are currently ill but who are well enough to continue working. In these instances, appropriate time-tracking software should be used to verify the employee's work time for payroll processes.

## Conflicts Between Levels of Government

In the event that any conflicts exist between the advice provided by local, state, and federal officials, the church will follow the guidance of local authorities with the expectation and understanding that local authorities are likely the most familiar with the situation on the ground in San Antonio, and are therefore the most accurate source of information on any infectious outbreak.