

Bethel United Church of Christ
4900 NE Parvin Rd.
Kansas City, MO 64117

Proposed Phased Reopening Plan for Bethel

We are Bethel United Church of Christ, a congregation in the Kansas City Northland, which is well-known for its warmth and friendliness. For many of us, Bethel is more than church - it is family! This has been making it all the more difficult for us to deal with the temporary shutdown of all worship services, meetings, and other face-to-face events which began on March 22, 2020. However, we know that shutdowns of schools, churches, restaurants, etc. along with the observance of social distancing rules, have been successful in helping our community, state, and country slow down the transmission of the deadly, new virus, COVID 19.

Now, two months after the shutdown, the whole country has been taking tentative steps to reopen parts of society while still taking major precautions in accordance with CDC guidelines. This has prompted some of us to ask when Bethel might be able to reopen. Clearly, everyone at Bethel would like our lives, including our spiritual lives, to “go back to normal.” But at this point it is still too risky to go back to our previous ways of doing church – perhaps farther down the road we can get closer to a new “normal” without masks or physical distancing - but there are things we can do to move forward while minimizing risk.

As your Church Council, we have been working to create a plan for reopening Bethel. We have examined recommendations from the UCC, the CDC, the city of Kansas City, and other churches. We have been urged by the national church to 1) postpone reopening until ALL safety concerns have been met, and (2) to make it our first priority to consider how our plan will affect the most vulnerable among us .And we have been guided by our mission statement: “Sharing love. Sharing Compassion. Sharing the word. Being Christ to our neighbor.”

Being Christ to our neighbors in this time of uncertainty may mean protecting our most vulnerable members by taking our time and waiting for several more weeks (depending on changing conditions) before attempting to reopen our worship and ministry to simplified in-person gatherings. After much discussion, reflection, and prayer, your Church Council is recommending that we continue our online worship services for now, while taking some steps that will prepare us for safely meeting in person again.

The following are highlights of a more detailed “Proposed Phased Reopening Plan for Bethel”

Phase One

This is where we have been since March 22 and will continue to be for the near future.

- Online Worship only
- Online Meetings only
- Church Office and building closed

Phase Two-A

Assuming numbers are still looking good around the middle of June, we are considering trying to have a “Drive-in church” experience in the Bethel parking lot. We can hold about 30 cars with a 6 foot space between cars. Worshippers need to stay in their cars with windows up, or wear masks if the windows are open. Pastor Karen, Jeremy and Chad will have microphones that will broadcast the service through our car radios. The church building will be closed except for bathroom emergencies, and we will need one or two volunteer attendants to make sure those who come in also exit the church quickly. The target date for this event is July 5. You will be notified of dates for our drive-in church services.

Phase Two-B

We will know we are in Phase Two-B if Missouri and Kansas City have been experiencing declines in COVID 19 Case Counts for about 4 weeks. Phase Two-B is basically a transition phase during which we begin the hard work of preparing Bethel for a return to in-person worship. This will require arranging for a thorough cleaning and sanitizing of the building, removing the Hymnals and Bibles from pew racks and putting them in storage, and creating signs reminding folks to wear masks, practice social distancing, etc. A team of ushers will need to be trained before re-opening, so they are ready to help people to sit safely. Ushers may also need to remind people to avoid social contact while entering and leaving.

Phase Three

After another 3 to 4 weeks of significant slowing of the pandemic (7-8 weeks of improvement), along with continued widespread availability of testing and PPE, the Council will review current conditions in Missouri and announce an opening date for in-person worship and ministry at Bethel! We will start with an in-person maximum of 50

people with room for some social distancing. We will have a system in place for keeping numbers under the limit - either calling in to sign up, or a lottery for a spot in the sanctuary. In Phase three, all attendees will have to wear a mask. Leaders will mask as needed. We won't sing or pass the peace, because these are high risk actions. Children will remain in the pews with parents for the children's story, and there will be no Bistro and no passing of an offering plate or communion plate. There will be a basket near the entrance to the sanctuary to place the offering, and worshippers will either bring their own bread and drink for communion, or Bethel will provide a pre-packaged wafer and grape juice, handed out to worshippers as they enter the sanctuary. The choir will not sing, but we may have some solos. The nursery will not be open, and there will be no Sunday School in Phase Three unless there is someone interested in arranging it virtually. **It is highly recommended that people who are over 65 and in the high-risk group consider carefully if they should attend in-person or continue with online services before an effective vaccine is available.**

Phase Four - a "new normal"?

This Phase can only begin after an effective vaccine has been tested, approved, and distributed to everyone. Cautious steps can then be taken toward moving back to a "normal" way of doing church: in-person, with reasonable physical distance, appropriate personal touch rituals, moderate use of food events, in-person meetings, the office open to the public, and mission/ministry events can be held.

Prayer for Reopening (from Rev. Dr. Ginny Brown Daniel MMS Conference)

Creator God, we pray that your wisdom would guide us in how and when to reopen our church. May this phased reopening plan provide a starting place for all pastors and church leaders making decisions during this pandemic. In your healing love we pray.

Amen