



FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF HORSEHEADS

Regathering of the Saints

ABSTRACT

This document describes the various procedures for insuring that the church is a safe place to worship even in the midst of Covid-19

Toby Locke – Pastor

Paul Aldrich – Business Administrator

paldrich@fbchh.org

Introduction

First Baptist Church has been an important part of the Village of Horseheads since 1840, when our church was founded. Our desire since our beginning has been to be faithful to the teachings of Jesus while serving the community where we gather. We have been ministering to the spiritual, emotional, and financial needs of scores of people in the community ever since. We have always seen ourselves as partners with our local government in helping our community flourish. We've hosted Red Cross blood drives (including two drives during the coronavirus crisis), made our facilities available to our local public elementary school on Center Street as needed during times of emergency, and welcomed the Summer Cohesion Program of Chemung County into our building to meet the practical needs of scores of families in our community during the summer months. We hope that there will be many other ways we can contribute to the Village of Horseheads in the years to come.

As a church we have suspended our regular Sunday gatherings since mid-March out of respect for the guidelines detailed in Governor Cuomo's "New York PAUSE" plan. We have done this gladly because we believe that the Bible teaches us to protect those among us who are vulnerable and also to show respect and honor to our government officials, especially when they are acting in the best interest of the health of the community at large. We thank you for your service in a difficult time.

We are submitting this proposal to you because our church's leadership team believes that it is time for us to reopen our Sunday services in a limited and responsible fashion on June 7th, which would coincide with the second half of Phase 2 of the "Smart Start" re-open initiative outlined by our county executive. We believe, and our plan will demonstrate, that we can do so in a way that satisfies the social distancing guidelines that the County is expecting local businesses to implement during Phase 2 of the reopening plan. These social distancing guidelines will remain in place as we all progress through the four phases during the summer months, and will only be relaxed (and additional programs reintroduced) when our region has fulfilled the expectations of all four phases of the "Smart Start" re-open initiative.

While Governor Cuomo has indicated his intention to allow churches to reopen their doors during Phase 4, we feel that perhaps he is not aware of the extent to which we are prepared to go to ensure that our congregation (we averaged about 150 attenders pre-pandemic in a building rated for over 390 occupants) complies with the extensive but reasonable social distancing protocols outlined in this Action Plan. We believe this will keep everyone safe while also allowing our congregants to follow their consciences and worship God in person with other believers, which is an important directive of the Christian faith.

We believe that our desire to reopen our Sunday services with social distancing measures in place will not only honor our responsibilities to God (of worship as well as encouragement and service) but will also provide an important service to our local community. To that end, we humbly and gladly submit the following action plan to every interested party so that we all might understand the steps we intend to take to ensure the safety of our congregation and the larger community.

Action Plan

(This follows the format of the communications issued by Chemung County on May 11, 2020.)

I. Adjust workplace hours and shift design as necessary to reduce density in the workplace.

A. Add services to reduce the number of people in the building at any one time.

Our worship center (auditorium) is rated at over 390 occupants but we normally would have about 150 people in the entire building on a Sunday pre-pandemic. We estimate that we can accommodate between 60 and 80 people in our auditorium at one time while practicing the social distancing protocols outlined in (II) below. In order to keep the number of people in the building at any one time down to a minimum, we will add a second worship service or seek other solutions, thereby ensuring that we are able to comply with the social distancing protocols.

B. Maintain a rigid schedule for the worship services.

It is normal for us to encourage people to stay at the church for as long as they would like to enjoy being with one another. In order to ensure that we can control the number of people in the building, we will encourage people to leave the building in a timely fashion after the service has been completed. We will maintain a 30-minute turnover time to escort the first service attenders out before we would bring in the next group of attenders.

C. Simplify the ministries held on each Sunday.

Our Sunday programming will offer worship services only. There will be no additional programming offered for any ages until such a time as it is safe to do so.

D. Continue to provide online options.

We expect a portion of our congregation to stay home for the foreseeable future (due to concerns about their own health or the health of someone in their family). In order to facilitate their continued involvement, we will continue to offer our programs (which include worship services for all ages and educational classes for adults and teens) online as we have these last few months. We will encourage those who are at high risk or do not feel comfortable joining us in person to continue to participate online.

II. Enact social distancing protocols during Sunday worship services.

The church will be divided into three main areas: (1) "Restricted" areas (locked and only to be accessed by leadership for emergency or necessity); (2) "Non-Distanced" areas, where masks must be worn; and (3) "Distanced" areas where six foot distances are maintained and masks may be removed once settled into their seating in the room. Signage will be posted in each area to identify the protocol for each area type.

- A. The worship center (our primary “Distanced” area) will have seating placed in such a way that families (or those who are sheltering together away from the church) can sit shoulder to shoulder, but stay separated from other attenders by no less than six feet in all directions.
1. Masks will be worn by attenders and must remain in place until they are seated.
 2. Ushers selected by the pastoral staff will escort each family unit from the entry door to their “Distanced” seating area in the worship center and ensure that each person is comfortable and that there is six feet of space between their family and the next family.
 3. To ensure that there is six feet between attenders, only every other row of seats will be used in a service and at least 4 seats or an aisle and 1 or 2 seats (depending on the width of the aisle) will separate attenders. If there are two services, the second service will use the rows which were not used in the first service.
 4. People will be allowed to leave the service for personal reasons, but they must put their mask on before leaving their seat and leave their mask on until they return to their seat. If someone leaves the service, it is expected under most circumstances they will return to their first seat only or else leave to sit in their car. Exceptions will be made if someone is ill or is dealing with a child, and will be seated elsewhere by an usher in a safe designated area.
 5. The attenders can stand and sit at their seat as a part of the worship service, but they should not move to other areas.
 6. When the service is over, the auditorium will be cleared in a timely and orderly fashion by the ushers who will dismiss the rows to specific exits or service areas.
 7. Stage setup in the Worship Center will be designed to maintain social distancing between musicians and pastors. At least 6 linear feet will be maintained between the stage or stage area and the first row of attenders.
 8. Access to the sound booth will be restricted such that we can maintain social distance between the technicians in the booth. These technicians will wear their masks before the service begins, during the turn-over between services and again after the last service has ended as attenders leave. They may remove their masks during the services if they wish.
- B. All other (“Non-Distanced”) areas of the church will require masks. These include but are not limited to hallways, restrooms, the gymnasium, and meeting rooms which do not have “Distanced” seating. Per CDC guidelines Cloth face coverings should not be placed on young children under age 2, anyone who has trouble breathing, or is unconscious, incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance.
1. Ushers or greeters will be at entry doors to open and close the doors for attenders to minimize direct contact transfer on door handles.
 2. Sanitizers will be available at all entries to the Worship Center should someone become contaminated before entering or after leaving the Worship Center.
 3. We will discontinue the passing of offering plates for the foreseeable future. There will be a giving box in the foyer in which to place tithes and offerings.

4. We will discontinue all forms of physical greetings (like hand shaking and hugs) until it is determined to be safe.
 5. Water fountains will be closed to reduce direct contact areas.
 6. If people should become queued waiting at the entry doors, they will be asked to form a line outside spacing six feet between family units until they get to the usher.
 7. Cleaning supplies will be left in the restrooms for anyone to use as desired to clean touch points before and/or after use. Instructions will be placed in all restrooms to wash hands. Restrooms will be inspected and all touch points will be cleaned every half hour during worship services by a designated attendant.
- C. Some aspects of the services and building will be modified to help control any contact contamination.
1. Areas of the church that will not be directly used for Worship Services or in support of the worship center, or areas used for ingress and egress from the worship center will be closed and where possible locked.
 2. We will not hold additional programming (such as Sunday School, children's ministries, nursery, or teen ministries) in person until it is determined safe to do so.
 3. Individual prepackaged cups with packaged crackers will be used for our monthly practice of Communion and will not require contact to distribute.
 4. All children 17 and under must be in the control of their parents or another designated adult, and should not congregate in the "Non-Distanced" parts of the building.
 5. Chlorine will be added to baptism water should a baptism service be held during these controlled phases.
 6. The 'Coffee Cove' and after service reception ministries and all food related ministries will be suspended until it is deemed safe to restore them.
 7. Ushers and church staff members will be responsible to ensure that attenders are complying with the 'social distancing' guidelines delineated in this plan.

III. Restrict non-essential travel for employees.

No travel for training, mission trips, or other events sponsored by the church will be allowed until it is safe to do so. Meetings of the church will continue to be offered online, providing an alternative to travel for those uncomfortable gathering in person.

IV. Require all employees and customers to wear masks if in frequent contact with others or if a six-foot social distance cannot be maintained.

See section 2B above.

V. Implement strict cleaning and sanitation standards.

- A. Add washroom postings for hand washing.
- B. Ensure sanitizing gels and wipes are available at entrances to the worship center.
- C. Ensure disinfectant is used on touch points including but not limited to: door handles; giving boxes; work surfaces (tables, sound equipment, video equipment, microphones, etc.); before and after service use.
- D. Vacuum rugs and soft surfaces regularly.
- E. Close the church kitchen for food related ministries for the foreseeable future.
- F. Disinfect touch points in the restrooms before each service starts. Inspect restrooms to see if they need care every half hour during the service times. Have cleaning supplies available for people to use during the services as needed.

VI. Enact a continuous health screening process for individuals to enter the workplace, some businesses may want to enact temperature checks as an added precaution.

- A. All staff will maintain health logs. We have focused on staff here as they will be the ones who meet the bulk of the people.
- B. Review current health status with ushers weekly and make reassignments or substitutions as necessary.

VII. Continue tracing, tracking, and reporting of cases

- A. Take the roll at each service to know who was there in case of any need to know for later tracing. To protect the privacy of our attenders, these rolls will only be available to the pastoral staff and will be destroyed no sooner than 14 days after the service, and not longer than 30 days after.
- B. Direct each attender to inform the church office if they have symptoms and encourage them to have testing done. Direct all attenders to not attend if they have any symptoms or have had a positive test.
- C. Pastoral staff are responsible for ensuring that any positive cases are reported to Health Department. They are also responsible for confronting anyone who tries to come to the church during service who has a confirmed case or suspected infection and establishing alternative methods to meet their spiritual or mental needs.

VIII. Develop Liability processes

We believe that our largest liability is due to the lack of clear information about the disease, symptom, and risks of the virus. To mitigate this liability, we will educate our attenders about the procedures and why they are being required. We will also ask those who are in anyway compromised or is caring for anyone who is compromised to stay home and attend services on-line for safety.

We will improve monitoring of the mental and physical health of our congregation through these worship services as well as the close relationships in the church.

We will schedule a “rehearsal” the Sunday before we implement this plan to test it and look for bugs in the system. All of the personnel we will utilize to make this plan work (including ushers and church staff) will be in place for the purpose of training. All personnel will form a panel for evaluating the plan and suggesting changes to the plan.

Conclusion

We understand and are thankful for the efforts put forth by our government to deal with this pandemic. Certainly, in some high population areas such as New York City these efforts were critical to ensure everyone’s health and safety. That being said, we are now glad to see that there is an easing of restrictions in the less populated areas and an improvement in outcomes for patients even in the high-density areas.

Now is the time to prepare for being able to help people to get back to doing what God has called, ordained, and created them to do, whatever that may be. As people of faith, we believe that being able to worship our God together is central to fulfilling our divine design and that for which God has ordained for us to do. With proper communication, execution, and adherence to this plan, we believe that Sunday Services can be held face-to-face with minimum risk to our attenders, volunteers, and staff. Furthermore, we are convinced that being able to practice our faith responsibly will benefit not only our members and regular attenders, but our community at large as well, over time.