A Framework for In-Person Gatherings

The Christian Church In Nebraska includes more than 40 Local Churches throughout the State of Nebraska stretching the entirety of the more than 470 miles from Falls City to Alliance (the complete, updated list of Local Churches in Nebraska can be found on our Web site at: Congregations of Nebraska Region – Disciples of Christ in Nebraska (disciples-ne.org)). It is true that most of our Local Churches are in the Southeast corner of the State (the triangle created by drawing a line from Falls City to Lincoln, Lincoln to Omaha, and Omaha to Falls City). It is also true that there are 12 Disciple Congregations located in the urban centers of Lincoln and Omaha. Which also means that 28 Disciple Congregations are in more rural communities.

The Regional Church offered support, guidance, and questions for consideration about how Local Churches might navigate the COVID-19 pandemic since March 2020. The nearly monthly letters can be found at the Regional Church’s web site’s COVID-19 Resources page, along with a link to the Regionwide conversations about coping with COVID-19 personally, and as communities of faith (COVID-19 Resources – Disciples of Christ in Nebraska (disciples-ne.org)).

Since April 2020, the Regional Board of the Christian Church In Nebraska has voted to suspend all Regional events, staff travel, and hosting or participating in in-person gatherings. At our May 6th meeting, the Regional Board will consider whether to:

1. Maintain the suspension of events, travel, and in-person gatherings;
2. Modify the suspension to loosen up the restrictions while providing a framework for the Board, its Committees/Commissions/Cabinets, and staff to follow; or
3. Allow for flexibility for the Board, its Committee/Commissions/Cabinets and staff in deciding whether and how navigate the question of hosting and participating in in-person gatherings.

As of April 13th, about 30 percent, or nearly 454,000 people have received their full vaccinations. On April 29th, the DHHS web site reported that 615,000 people (41.5% of NEB population) have now been fully vaccinated, and another 208,000 people (14.1% of NEB population) have been partially vaccinated.

So that the Regional Board is able to have a robust conversation about navigating the COVID-19 pandemic from May 6, 2021 forward, the following framework is offered.

I. Recommended Guiding Principles

A. Require the use of masks by all participants, including staff and volunteer staff:
   1. Anyone who is not willing to wear a mask that they will need to leave the gathering;
   2. Identify a “host” or “ushers” for Regional Events who are responsible for holding participants accountable;

1 Sources for this guidance include: Nebraska Department of Health & Human Services COVID-19 Guidance Documents; and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
3. For young people and people with differing abilities for whom wearing a mask for an extended period of time may be difficult, ensuring that masks cover both the mouth and nose is important – provide clear instructions, and provide support as needed;
   a. Should someone not be able to breath, or be incapacitated, it is OK to remove their mask
B. Require the needed social distancing of six feet between all participants, at all times;
   1. This includes limiting personal contact (e.g., no hugs, handshakes) to elbow and foot bumps;
   2. Identify a “host” or “ushers” for Regional Events who are responsible for holding participants accountable;
C. Reduce the length of interaction (to less than 10 minutes in one “sitting”) between participants as the risk of spreading COVID-19 increases the longer the interaction;
D. Stagger the use of shared spaces for such things as meals and socializing so that people can maintain safe social distancing;
E. Gather in small groups who remain together in that same, single group for entirety of the gathering is highly recommended;
F. Participants should not exchange, share, or hand to another participant, any objects, whether food, drink, utensils, paper, art supplies, or other objects;
G. When possible host the gathering outdoors;
H. Provide plenty of opportunities for participants to wash their hands with soap and water, as well as having sanitizer (containing at least 60% alcohol) readily available for everyone;
   1. Ensure that there is plenty of soap, water, and paper towels/hot air blower for people to use;
   2. Do not use a shared hand towel for drying;
I. Before and after each gathering (if it is a multi-day gathering, at the end of each day) disinfecting all touched surfaces: door handles, sinks/faucets, drinking fountains, kitchen prep areas, tables, chairs, toys/games, and shared surfaces;
   1. Multi-day gatherings include a schedule for disinfecting all areas;
   2. Staff and volunteers who remove trash should wear gloves while removing and carrying trash/trash bags, and then wash hands with soap after returning;
J. Teach/Remind all participants of some simple etiquette during the gathering to help further ensure the health and safety of all participants, like when sneezing or coughing to do so by covering their mouths with the interior of their arm and using tissues, throwing away the tissue, followed by washing their hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds;
K. Use disposable food service items (e.g., utensils, dishes, cups);
   1. Any food service items that are not disposable should be handled by people wearing gloves, especially after they have been used and are being washed;
L. Food provided at any gathering will preferably be pre-packaged in boxes or bags;
M. Overnight gatherings should include maintaining safe social distancing;
   1. Beds should be spaced so that no person is closer than six feet from another person;
   2. Plastic flexible screens should be installed between all beds, as well as in bathrooms to separate sinks, urinals/toilets (where there are not existing walls);
   3. Do not allow participants to leave toothbrushes, hair brushes/combs, other toiletries on shared surfaces/counters;

II. Communications
A. Convey that the individual, committee/cabinet, and/or board reserves the right to cancel participation in, and/or hosting of a gathering should the numbers related to the COVID-19 pandemic indicate;

B. To tell potential participants (including staff and volunteers) to stay home if they have tested positive for COVID-19;

C. To tell potential participants (including staff and volunteers) stay home if they are sick, and/or have cold symptoms, and/or fever.

D. If the gathering will include more than 15 people, plan for people to arrive at staggered times so that a large group of people are not standing and waiting in the same area;

E. Post signs throughout the venue (e.g., entrance, registration area, dining area, meeting space) to communicate that masks are required in the space where the gathering is being held;
   1. Print and display the CDC posters found at How To Protect Yourself and Others (cdc.gov) or other similar signage;
   2. Images for masks can be found at mask icon - Google Search

III. Signs of Illness by Participants (Including Staff)

A. If a participant shows signs of becoming ill, that person should be moved to a separate room or space;

B. If there is a nurse present, they should follow the Standard and Transmission-Based Precautions (also, see: What Healthcare Personnel Should Know About Caring for Patients with Confirmed or Possible COVID-19 Infection)

C. Staff should have a plan for transporting anyone who begins to show signs of illness, and/or are ill;
   1. If the plan is to call an ambulance, when calling alert the service that the person may have COVID-19;

D. Close off the area/room where the person has been, including discontinuing the use of any surfaces (e.g., tables, chairs, beds) where the person has been until it has been cleaned and disinfected;
   1. Wait 24 hours before cleaning and disinfecting, using disinfectant products;

E. Notify public health officials and other related staff (including Regional Minister);
   1. Notify family members of a child;

F. Staff and volunteers who have close contact with someone who has become/is sick should also separate themselves from the rest of the group and, if they begin to show signs, should follow the CDC guidelines for caring for yourself;