

Getting Ready to Return

As we settle into the new norm COVID-19 has created, it's time to think about what happens when our churches reopen. While we look forward to the day we can worship together in-person, the way we once gathered will inevitably look different. This reality is leading us to create contingency plans for the reopening of church buildings in order to help our congregation prepare for this new way of gathering in the future. Slowly phasing in gatherings over a period of time can benefit our faith community by putting the spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional health of our congregations first. This guide is designed to help you think through various points of consideration as your church implements new methods and procedures to prepare your operations for the changes in the way we gather and worship.

The Federal Government has recommended a 3 phase re-open plan. Before you even begin preparing, make sure you know which phase you are under and which restrictions apply in your area. You will then need to revisit your plans for each phase.

PHASE 1: All vulnerable individuals should continue to shelter in place. All individuals, when in public (e.g., parks, outdoor recreation areas, shopping areas), should maximize physical distance from others. Avoid socializing in groups of more than 10 people in circumstances that do not readily allow for appropriate physical distancing. Minimize non-essential travel.

PHASE 2: All vulnerable individuals should continue to shelter in place. All individuals, when in public (e.g., parks, outdoor recreation areas, shopping areas), should maximize physical distance from others. Social settings of more than 50 people, where appropriate distancing may not be practical, should be avoided unless precautionary measures are observed. Non-essential travel can resume.

PHASE 3: Return to normalcy for most Americans, with focus on identification and isolation of any new infections.

PREPARING YOUR BUILDING(S)

1. Deep clean your entire church. Consider shampooing carpets, sanitizing pews, bathrooms, doorknobs, light switches, microphones, etc. (CDC resources for sanitation: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility> | www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations)
2. Pay attention to the preschool and children's areas. Consider removing everything nonessential from the room to limit surfaces for potential contamination and do a thorough cleaning in between uses.
3. Stock up on supplies: hand sanitizer, masks, toilet paper, cleaning supplies, etc.
4. Think through your strategy to clean and sanitize your church in real time. It's one thing to prepare in advance of people's return to the church building, but how will you keep the place clean and disinfected on an on-going basis?

COMMUNICATING YOUR NEW NORMAL

1. Be up front with your congregation that the way you once gathered will inevitably look different as you begin to phase-in in-person gatherings. Provide specifics (offering, communion, hand-shaking, etc.).
2. Tell your congregation how you've prepared the church for their arrival. Be sure to use words such as: clean, safe, sanitized, disinfected, etc.
3. Remind people ahead of time that if they are sick they should not be present and can join online instead.
4. Tell people the precautions you want them to take ahead of time (masks, hand washing, etc.).
5. Post signs about not shaking hands and doing non-contact greetings.
6. Make sure you are communicating whether or not Sunday school, small groups and other normal gatherings of the church will meet in-person and the reasons behind your decision.
7. Once you begin gathering, continue to over-communicate the precautions that will be taken at your church. People will hold new health expectations after this crisis.

COMMON SPACES & HOSPITALITY

1. Decide how cars will be parked in a way to create space between vehicles.
2. Restrooms: If bathrooms are open, have signs posted to ensure hands are washed and social distancing is followed. Have a plan for sanitizing the restrooms in real-time.
3. Avoid handing out or distributing materials of any kind and instead project all announcements on screens or make verbal announcements.
4. Withhold coffee stations or congregation-wide meals until it is safe to reintroduce these services.
5. Place hand sanitizer throughout the church.
6. Encourage members to wear masks or supply masks for those without one to increase comfort levels.

STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

1. Consider which staff members and volunteers are needed for the prepping and opening of the building.
2. Meet with all serving team volunteers prior to re-opening. Be understanding towards anyone that does not feel comfortable serving.
3. Consider a temperature check on all staff and volunteers.

WORSHIP SERVICES

1. Celebrate the return! Hopefully you have some time to plan a special service your first Sunday back in the building.
2. Keep an online meeting option for those who are afraid or unable to attend your service in person.

3. Consider adjustments to your worship space to create distance among people: rope off every other pew, space out chairs, encourage only those from the same household to sit together.
4. Consider offering multiple services to encourage a greater chance of social distancing. One way to ensure your services are evenly spread is to have people sign up for a service.
5. Consider what adjustments you will make to communion, baptisms, and your choir/worship ministry.
6. Avoid passing a plate or basket for offering. Have stations in the church where people can drop offerings instead of passing a plate. Continue offering online giving options.
7. Avoid passing microphones on the stage.
8. Instead of a time of "meet and greet," come up with a fun way to greet others in a no-contact way.
9. Consider dismissing in an orderly way to ensure there is social distancing.

GROUP GATHERINGS, COMMITTEES, SUNDAY SCHOOL, AND SMALL GROUPS

1. Create contingency plans that minimize large gatherings. A few considerations: maintain online services, continue online committee meetings and small groups throughout the week, consider drive-in worship initially.
2. Decide whether you will have Sunday school or small groups. You may decide to start with your worship service online and phase-in Sunday school and small groups.
3. Consider dividing your groups to maintain social distancing standards, especially if your classrooms are smaller in size.
4. If you do have classes, have a plan to clean the doorknobs, water fountains, and other high traffic areas in between uses.
5. Decide whether to hold mid-week Wednesday night services, meals and Bible studies.
6. Decide whether you will continue hosting special events (ex. luncheons, weddings, funerals, children's programs/choir, etc.).

CHILDREN'S MINISTRY

1. Determine if you will continue offering children's church, classes and/or nursery when you first start back. You may consider not opening preschool and children on the first Sunday back.
2. Involve parents in planning. That way you hear their concerns and gain their involvement. Make sure to communicate your plan to parents so they know what to expect when you return.
3. Consider pre-registering children to limit how many are in any room at a time.
4. Limit leaders in the preschool and children's areas to those who do not have pre-existing conditions and/or are not over 65 years old.
5. Have extra volunteers to help in the preschool ministry where some children may suffer from separation anxiety after only being with parents for a long time.
6. Consider adjustments to child check-in procedures.
7. Have a checklist of what's been cleaned and when in each room.
8. Develop a list of procedures for your volunteers. Host a meeting with volunteers to discuss safety procedures for reopening this environment.
9. Determine what you will do about camps and VBS, possibly canceling or delaying until later in the summer if/when it is safe to do so.

CONTINUING ONLINE WORSHIP

1. If you have been using online platforms for worship, determine if you will continue even after you are back to in-person gatherings. The most obvious takeaway is that use of online platforms during COVID-19 is being maximized. It may be challenging but necessary for leaders to consider how they can continue their online presence.
2. Consider investing in additional digital equipment to continue online worship.
3. Consider if a new staff or volunteer position is needed in light of continuing online worship.

FINANCES & “PLAN B” STRATEGY

This is the time churches need to be thinking about finances and preparing for “What if…” scenarios – what if our offerings don’t hold steady because of rising unemployment of members? Before the church returns to the building, every church needs a “plan B” strategy just in case giving drops in late summer or early fall.

Things to consider for a “Plan B” strategy:

1. Calculate what expenses have already been reduced during the time church was closed. Offerings were down but so were expenses. Someone needs to calculate these details. Consider this as you look at adjusting your budget.
2. What future events will not take place? Are there budgeted trips and events you will not hold? Drop them from your spending plans.
3. Does a wider group than just the finance committee need to be involved in a major budget restructuring? Sometimes involving people in the discussion helps alleviate angst and feeling “left out” or “devalued.” Perhaps the finance committee can work with a larger group to develop the broad picture of where the budget needs to go.
4. It may sound strange, but there is a saying: “Never waste a good disaster.” This economic difficulty may give your church the energy to make some budget changes which really needed to be made anyway. Ineffective programs can be discontinued. Programs which once were valuable but no longer hit the mark can be closed down. Staff realignment may be possible. Seize the opportunity.
5. Draw a “worst case” budget scenario: if our receipts for 2020 are 50% of what they were in 2019, what will we do? Better to plan now than react in late October when the funds are no longer there.
6. Think about who will be making financial decisions. Persons in deep personal financial difficulty may have a hard time being objective or realistic about the church’s finances. Consider how you will handle this.
7. THINK VERY CAREFULLY about how you communicate the church’s financial needs. Persons who are out of work or who live off a declining stock portfolio may react poorly to the normal appeals for giving that churches do when income is down. It may be that you need more one-on-one appeals than you need general public appeals.
8. THINK VERY CAREFULLY before you draw on church endowments or investments. If they have lost value due to stock market volatility, drawing them down now could mean you can’t share in the re-bounce. Is it prudent to delay taking a draw if you can until the market has stabilized? Cashing in a CD may be a better option, if you have any.

9. If you have not had an online giving option before, do you need to develop one now? The easier you make giving, the better for your donors.
 - Information for [online giving platforms can be found here.](#)

MENTAL HEALTH

1. Consider how you will address the personal and family struggles that may have surfaced in the last couple of months (ex. marriage or financial strain, emotional or physical abuse, substance abuse, job loss).
2. Be prepared for an increase in the need for counseling, and be ready to offer names of professionals to refer people to in this post-COVID 19 reality.
3. Helpful resources for guidance:
 - [Coronavirus and Addiction: The current crisis presents a challenge to some in recovery.](#)
 - [American Society of Addiction COVID-19 resources](#)
 - [Considering Faith, Community, & Mental Health During the COVID-19](#)