



## Guide for reopening churches

There isn't a flip the switch moment when we will be back to normal, so ongoing, constructive, evaluative conversations are necessary.

There are no black and white answers, nor a one-size-fits-all way to respond. There are best practices, common sense behaviors to take, and actions that are medically advisable, but no plan will fit every situation. It is appropriate to distinguish between urban and rural settings as well as large, mid-size, and smaller congregations as leaders craft a plan that maintains health and wellness while allowing for services to resume.

### Evaluate

Church leadership in every congregation should take a practical, hard, introspective look at what their abilities are and who their congregation is. Evaluate the physical space and lay-out of the building and what percentage of the congregation and staff fall into medical at-risk categories. **Know your demographics!** Churches should not reopen until they have a clear picture of who they are and have assessed their preparedness.

### Behavioral Plan and Training

What will pastors, other staff, elders and/or ushers do when someone does not comply with the guidance/instructions laid out by the congregational leadership (e.g. not wearing a mask or sitting too close to others), or is obviously sick?

### Guiding Principles

The following are some of the factors to consider:

- The safety of your members and your community
- Holy wisdom on fellowship and gatherings
- The church's public witness
- The prayerful wisdom of faith leaders
- The particular needs and circumstances of your congregation
- The latest recommendations/orders from the CDC and your State/Provincial Department of Health.

### Communication Strategy

With your leadership team, outline a strategy for reopening and how you will communicate your upcoming plans.

Keep in mind the following perspectives:

- Guidelines and recommendations are being updated continually. It is important for your people to be fully informed of your plans and protocols via email, website, and phone calls. This is one of the most important aspects to coming back together. Making sure everyone has the most updated information and understands what to do.
- Some will be thrilled to meet again, as soon as possible. Others will feel that a "wait and see" approach is more fitting. Choose your words as carefully as possible when conveying your

plans. Please make sure that you state clearly that each person needs to act on their own conscience and should not feel pressured to do what everyone else is doing. This is especially true for those who have a higher risk factor.

- As sensitively as possible, help families with young children, senior citizens, and those who are at higher risk from COVID-19 to understand why others in your congregation may be reasonably concerned for their safety.

### **Be Informed**

Know the risk factors for the virus. This can help you make decisions on staffing, volunteers, and whether you will return sooner or later.

Be in constant communication with members. Also know that there is no rush to return to the building. You can continue doing online services or drive-in church if your congregation is still experiencing anxiety and fear. One key factor is finding a way to provide the Lord's Supper in a reasonable and safe fashion without compromising the theological integrity and biblical fidelity.

### **Prepare Your Church**

- Deep clean your entire church. Where will germs be transferred? Consider shampooing carpets, sanitizing pews, bathrooms, doorknobs, light switches, and microphones.
- Use chemicals and disinfectants as directed and allow for the proper dry times.
- Remove Bibles, hymnals, pens, information cards, etc., from the backs of chairs/pews.
- Post signs about not shaking hands and doing non-contact greetings.
- Order now a supply of hand sanitizers, face masks, and gloves for members should they want them. This needs to take place now, so you have these items when you return.
- Tell your congregation through flyers on the doors, email, and social media about how you've prepared the church for their arrival.
- Be sure to use the words "clean, safe, and mindful of health needs and issues in preparation for a non-touch experience" or something similar. Also say that if they are sick, then they should not be present and can join online instead.

### **Ask the Questions**

- Will you reopen the doors of your church with a "worship only" strategy?
- What if your worship is initially limited in the number of people?
- What adjustments will you make to the Lord's Supper, Baptisms, and your choir ministry?
- Is this the time to end your church's "meet and greet" time?
- What about Passing the Peace?
- Do door greeters do their jobs differently, or at all?
- Is a physical "pass the plate" offering a thing of the past?
- Should you add and/or shorten worship services to allow for physical distancing?
- What are you doing now to sanitize and sterilize your church building?
- What is your strategy to clean and sanitize your church in real time?
- Because people may return very slowly to church, how will you count attendance and effectiveness?
- What should your congregation expect of outside groups that use the building?
- Are you going to continue offering children's church/ministry?
- What is your plan for Sunday School curriculum?
- Are you canceling summer camps/VBS or delaying them until later in the summer?

- Are you going to host midweek services, meals, or special events?
- What about fellowship times between services?

## **Template for Re-Engaging in Public Religious Gatherings**

The following document is not legal, medical, or policy advice. This phased-in approach is offered as a consideration for those desiring to resume public worship.

### **Phase I**

Possible Marker: After your State/Province's Stay-at-Home orders are lifted or amended

#### **A. Days Leading Up to Service(s)**

- 1) Check with the latest from the CDC, State/Provincial Department of Health, and county/municipality level authorities.
- 2) Develop tentative re-entry schedule with leadership team
- 3) Have online signups for people to come so you can plan for the numbers that may enter the building at any one time.
- 4) Communicate preparations and expectations via Facebook, website, video, and email.
  - a. No youth or children's classes; no nursery
  - b. Follow CDC recommendations (masks, washed hands, hand sanitizer, etc.)
  - c. Advertise adjustments below
- 5) Encourage elderly, ill, and at-risk groups to stay home
  - a. Consider alternative service for healthy individuals 65 and over
- 6) Consult resources for guidance on how to care for and protect children and youth.
  - a. Families should be encouraged to keep their children in family groups.
- 7) Continue to offer online/alternative worship services.
- 8) Post signage of protocols inside and outside building.
- 9) To limit crowd size, consider adding services to allow for staggered seating.
  - a. Example: one service for households with names A-M, another for households N-Z.

#### **B. Day of; Before Service**

- 1) All attendees take temperatures before arriving
- 2) Sanitation teams begin wiping bathrooms, door handles regularly with disinfectant
- 3) Greeters present, standing 6-10 feet from doors, wearing masks
- 4) Prop open doors to limit touching door handles
- 5) Coffee stations and cafes should remain closed at all times with no coffee hours until this situation is more under control.
- 6) Supply masks upon entry and hand sanitizer throughout the building, with touchless dispensers if possible
- 7) "Closed" signs on kids' rooms and nursery with those doors locked
- 8) Institute staggered seating requirements
- 9) Ushers maintain physical distance while guiding people to seats
- 10) Live stream to other rooms/locations as needed.
- 11) Restrooms: You must decide whether you will allow bathroom usage at this time. If you don't think you can allow it, then it may not be time to return to the building.
- 12) Do not hand out bulletins. Do not allow people to come by and pick them up out of stacks.

#### **C. During service**

- 1) No youth or children's classes (children stay in family groups)

- 2) Do not direct people to shake hands, hug, etc.
- 3) Encourage families/households to sit together
- 4) Announce and observe physical distancing protocols
- 5) Worship leaders and pastors should practice physical distancing and not share equipment (mics, instruments, music stands, etc.)
- 6) Consider length of service time, taking into consideration the risks of exposure in longer gatherings.
- 7) Minimize need for restrooms
- 8) No offering plates passed; offer online giving or provide stationary open giving receptacles without handles. Provide a single area to place envelope.
- 9) Utilize screens or apps instead of hard copy bulletins and connect cards
- 10) Lord's Supper
  - a) Communion servers must wear masks and gloves
  - b) Consider temporarily stopping practices such as common cup, intinction, etc.

#### D. After Service

- 1) Structured dismissals (e.g. by rows or sections) allowing people to leave in smaller groups and go outside (no congregating in lobby)
- 2) Sanitize all chairs, pews, equipment, bathrooms, etc.

### **Phase II**

Possible Marker: Low spread of COVID-19 confirmed by State/Provincial Department of Health after initial lockdown has been lifted or modified.

A. Observe Phase I Protocols

B. Church nursery and Sunday School resumes; other in-person ministries resume based on comfort level of leaders.

C. Consider alternative service/location for those who may be at greater risk

- 1) Be sure to deep clean all surfaces and toys (if applicable) between services
- 2) Consider restricting number of children in each class

### **Phase III**

Possible Marker: When State/Province Lifts all Restrictions on Large Group Gatherings

A. Service schedules cautiously return to normal or as normal as possible

B. Observe updated CDC, federal, and state/provincial guidelines as warranted.

C. Maintain readiness to return to prior phases as warranted.

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### **Disclaimer**

As we continue to receive updates and more information about the COVID-19 outbreak in North America, this guidance is subject to change, and may lead to changes in normal church service routines for a longer time period than is covered in this brief guide.

**“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.” Psalm 46:1**