

Guidance for Reopening Your Church

Central District Conference, April 2020

As congregations consider reconvening public worship and activities following Covid-19, it is important to Prepare, Communicate and Practice effectively. The following information is drawn from several sources and is offered as guidance as each congregation develops their own procedures. Perhaps this can be seen as a “first phase” response. Changes and additions can be made along the way as restrictions are relaxed more broadly. **Pay attention to local guidance and then be more cautious than that! We do not want to bear the burden of spreading this deadly virus among our congregation or community!**

Identify potential gifts that your journey with Covid-19 can offer your congregation.

In an article, *So you want to go back to church (as usual?)!*, Conference Minister, Doug Luginbill, suggests doing some intentional reflection on your experiences (personal and as a congregation). Crises always have something to teach us about ourselves and the communities of which we are a part. You are encouraged to explore these potential learnings and perhaps implement some new practices or let go of others as you move forward as a congregation.

Identify the decision makers and implementers.

Who will make decisions and develop practices regarding reconvening worship and church activities?

1. Take seriously your state and local governmental guidance regarding reopening. If public gatherings are limited to 10, **don't** worship together, etc. Implement the practical guidance they offer. **Error on the side of caution and safety!**
2. Utilize several people in this discernment process. Utilize our “priesthood of all believers” theology in doing good discernment. Invite a variety of perspectives and be sure to include individuals with medical background. Maybe this is the church board or council or maybe it is a temporary task group for this process alone. Take into account the vulnerable members of the congregation; those over 60, medically compromised, those relying on public transportation, etc.
3. Communicate to the congregation how the decision is being made and who to contact with questions and suggestions. Know that not everyone will be pleased. Give the freedom for people to express their perspectives and give people grace to reengage when they are ready.
4. Communicate your intentions to reconvene church activities **at least two weeks** in advance. Last minute decisions cause confusion and invite distrust of decisions and decision-makers.
5. For congregations that rent space, be in regular and clear communication with your landlord. Find out when and how many people they are allowing in the building. Ask clarifying questions about how the landlord will be cleaning the building, who else will be using the building and when, etc. Perhaps offer to help cover expenses for additional hand sanitizers, cleaning supplies, and other additional interventions to prepare for safe use of the facility. Be clear about what health and safety expectations landlords have for renters.

Continue to offer ways to worship for those who are unable or don't feel comfortable returning to in-person church.

1. It is likely that not everyone will be ready to worship in person right away. Offer grace and give folks the freedom to reenter when they are comfortable.
2. As much as possible, continue to provide worship/church activities online for those who don't worship in person.

3. Find ways to acknowledge and support those who aren't part of in person worship including sharing their prayer requests, joys, etc.

Consider gathering for “limited contact” worship as your first reopening event. Consider only holding worship at first and do this for three weeks or longer before adding other events/activities.

1. This may seem counterintuitive since a worship service is the largest gathering of people for a church activity.
2. Gathering first for corporate worship gives the opportunity to be re-grounded and re-centered in God.
3. Worship is also the easiest activity to “control.” (See below for “limited contact worship.”) This also allows everyone to hear important announcements at the same time.
4. At the first worship service, create a common commitment together, recognizing that we are entrusting our health to each other and that limiting our contact is a way of honoring and celebrating the life among us.
5. Hold three weeks of worship before considering the addition of other church activities. This “slow reopening” allows time for continued planning and learning. It also allows observation of how the infection is responding locally as the community reengages in public spaces. If infections begin to increase, you can reassess your response.

Preparing your building for activity

1. This may be a good opportunity to deep clean your entire church. Where will germs be transferred? Consider shampooing carpets, sanitizing pews, handrails, bathrooms, water fountains, doorknobs and handles, light switches, microphones, etc.
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. Post signs about not shaking hands and doing non-contact greetings. You can promote the hashtag #itsoktosmileandwave.
4. Communicate to your congregation at least a week in advance by email and social media about how you've prepared the church for their arrival. When you've opened, also post this information on flyers on the doors. 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.
5. Communicate clearly that anyone who is not feeling well should remain home and remind them of other ways they can participate in worship or church activities.
6. Clean and sanitize before and after each church event.
7. Add hand sanitizers throughout the building. “No-contact” hand sanitizers are preferred but be sure to keep them functioning!

Practice “Limited Contact” Worship

1. Think through all the ways individuals come into close contact with one another in worship and limit those as much as possible.
 - If possible, prop doors open (or have a host be the door opener) so people aren't touching handles.
 - Utilize bulletin-free worship
 - Eliminate or adapt ordinances and rituals so that only the pastor/worship leader is touching religious objects.
 - “Pass the peace” with a well-spaced bow, smile or nod or eliminate this activity all together during this season.

- If possible, only use every-other pew/row and ask family groups or singles to allow six feet between one another.
 - Invite offerings that don't utilize passing containers. (Money counters wear gloves.)
 - Tell children's stories to everyone instead of huddling the children up front. Or clearly mark safe spaces using tape on the floor.
 - No handshakes, hugs, or other touches allowed.
 - Encourage (require?) wearing of masks. Make clean masks available. Reinforce coughing and sneezing into the elbow.
2. Unfortunately, singing is a good way to spread germs. Perhaps focus on listening only to the words for a few weeks. Or listen to a recording of the songs. Or use "performed music" rather than congregational songs.
 3. Limit worship to one hour and restrict restroom and water fountain use for emergencies only! This is another good reason to begin only with worship. People can come and go and limit the spaces that they can "contaminate."
 4. Invite slow and intentional entry and exit into/out of the worship space. Keep distances between one another, encourage informal conversations take place outdoors and at safe distances, discourage congregating in the fellowship hall or other indoor spaces. Consider cordoning off some sections of the building.
 5. Refrain from coffee stations, snacks, potlucks, use of the kitchen, use of library, use of water fountains, etc.

Sunday School, Small Groups, Committee Meetings, Etc.

1. Communicate clearly at least two weeks in advance when you will have Sunday school, youth groups, small groups, etc.
2. Consider continuing to hold most meetings via video/audio conferencing.
3. Consider dividing your groups to maintain the social distancing standards if you have small groups.
4. If you do have class, please know you should clean the doorknobs, water fountains, and other high traffic areas in between uses.
5. Have a plan for your leaders and teachers. Will they discuss what God revealed to them in the quarantine? Will you encourage a prayer and praise time?
6. If Sunday school or small groups aren't meeting, encourage teachers/leaders to engage with members in other ways that align with your communication policies; phone calls, email, social media, etc.

Preschool and Children

1. Consider pre-registering children to limit how many are in any room at a time. Some churches are starting with a five-child limit in each room at first.
2. Limit leaders in the preschool and children's areas to those who do not have pre-existing conditions and/or are not over 60 years old. If you cannot identify volunteers with lower health risk, consider recording stories or giving a children's Bible or activity kit to each household.
3. 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.
4. Have only one person handle child check-in stations and do not pass the check-in device.
5. Have a check list of what's been cleaned and when in each room.
6. Develop a list of procedures for your volunteers. Train them on this list through Zoom prior to the first meeting.

Financial

Budget planning is a critical element for ministry consideration as you plan towards reopening your church campus.

1. What has been the impact on tithes and offerings? Can you project long-term trends on giving? What is the bottom-line impact of these giving trends?
2. Implement online or electronic giving options and communicate this to the congregation.
3. Cleaning and contact mitigation efforts will be an ongoing expense that is most likely beyond current budget planning. How will you fund these required resources? (donations of cleaning supplies, budget adjustment, etc.)
4. What new ministry opportunities have you identified and what are the associated costs?
5. Can you make immediate church budget adjustments or do changes require church body approval?
6. Do you have a “caring or sharing fund?” How will you communicate ways this can be supported or accessed?
7. If you reduce (or increase) giving to outside ministries such as conference, institutions, community ministries, it is helpful to communicate these changes so these ministries can plan accordingly.
8. Is this a time to reconsider spending plan priorities? Is building a 6-month cash reserve a goal to work toward? Should you update policies for your sharing fund?
9. If you have more than a 6-month reserve, is there an organization that you can contribute to which doesn't have such a reserve?