

Questions Your Church Should Answer Before People Return¹

Initial Questions

1. How many people in your community are in the at-risk category? How does that impact your planning?
2. How will you communicate clearly that deciding to stay home is an appropriate and respected decision?
3. How will you communicate the decisions you are making regarding re-opening? What language will you use in those communications: we are seeking to love our neighbors by taking these precautions, we have a responsibility to take steps that will reduce the risk to the most vulnerable in our community, etc.
4. Is a simple majority decision by the session enough to move forward with re-opening the building and resuming in-person programming? Or would it be beneficial to determine that a two-thirds majority or unanimous decision is necessary to move forward?
5. What plans will you have in place if the pastor or a member of the church tests positive for COVID-19 after you begin gathering?
6. How will you be intentional and gradual about adding activities according to your congregation's ability to maintain COVID-19 related precautions?
7. What level of risk of infection to the gathered community is acceptable? Because of the ability of asymptomatic people to be carriers and the increased risk of infection with prolonged exposure in an enclosed space, it is almost impossible to guarantee a completely risk-free environment.
8. Given the time, talent, and financial resources available within the congregation and its leadership, what is the best use of those resources? Will you be able to continue focusing on mission and ministry while also doing the necessary work to create a safer environment within the church building?

¹ Drawn from Ken Braddy, "24 Questions Your Church Should Answer Before People Return," <https://kenbraddy.com/2020/04/18/20-questions-your-church-should-answer-before-people-return/?fbclid=IwAR2vHPuO5fxeo5OrB4GB8Ycp6yqG5kSZujpSermNtqikdwWstmo7LZ8-NB0>, accessed 4.20.2020.

Worship

What plans will you have in place for gatherings of up to 25 people? 50 people? 100 people?

1. Masks are required to be worn. What will you do if someone arrives without a mask?
2. Every-other row (or two rows, if needed) roped off. The spacing should be closer to 10 feet than 6 feet between rows/pews.
3. Tape on pews / chairs to indicate where to sit in order to maintain social distancing.
4. Multiple services, even in smaller congregations, or dividing the attendance into appropriately sized groups that are assigned Sundays to attend in person.
5. Doors and windows remain open for the entire gathering, even in inclement weather, with gloved volunteers stationed at all doors. Establish an entry and exit flow to minimize choke points.
6. Continue virtual worship.
7. No printed bulletins: use PowerPoint if available or have liturgist “call out” the service. Email bulletins in advance and invite people to print their own or bring them on mobile devices. Nothing that will be handed from one person to another.

What adjustments will you make to the Lord’s Supper, baptisms, and your choir ministry?

1. Are these elements essential to worship if they increase the risk to those who have gathered?
2. If the session decides to include any of these elements, what precautions will be taken to minimize risk?

Lord’s Supper

1. All communion by intinction; no passing plates. What other adjustments will you make to ensure that those holding the elements are protected? How will you manage the flow of people coming forward so they maintain social distancing?
2. Bread and cup that are broken and poured are symbolic only, not used to serve the people.
3. Communion servers provide individual pieces of bread with tongs or while wearing gloves; only the servers touch the bread.
4. The cup is given with the small, individualized, plastic glasses.

Baptisms

1. Have parents/guardian hold the child and distribute the water.
2. Pastor proclaims the Trinitarian formula as the parents apply the water to the baptized.
3. Extended family is not invited forward so the number of people at the font are limited.

Choir Ministry and Congregational Singing

1. Singing projects aerosolized droplets as far as 50 feet; all congregational and special singing should be avoided during in-person gatherings.

Is this the time to end your church's "meet and greet" time? What about the Passing the Peace?

1. Are these elements essential to worship if they increase the risk to those who have gathered?
2. If the session decides to include any of these elements, what precautions will be taken to minimize risk?
3. Minimize opportunities to "meet and greet," especially during phase one and phase two of the federal guidelines.
4. Passing the Peace can be a liturgical response between pastor/liturgist and the congregation, without turning to one's neighbor.
5. If the Passing of the Peace continues, alternative means should be used to convey the peace: prayer hands folded in front of one's chest, touching the heart, or bowing are all appropriate.

Do door greeters do their jobs differently, or at all?

1. Greeters do not shake hands, ever.
2. Practice social distancing.
3. If anything needs to be distributed, such as bulletins, they are placed individually on a table for worshippers to pick up.

How do we take up the offering?

1. There should be no passing the plate: place an offering plate at the sanctuary exits (as in Calvin's Geneva).
2. Continue online offerings.
3. Intensify promotion of online giving.

Should you make other adjustments to allow for social distancing?

1. Churches with small or normally full sanctuaries may need to take additional precautions to limit the number of people who are present at one time. What is the safe number of people for your space based on social distancing guidelines? What will you do if more people than that safe number arrive for worship?
2. Do you have the capacity to offer more than one service each Sunday? If so, how will that that extra level of commitment and energy be offset by reducing other commitments during the week?
3. In addition to social distancing, the length of exposure in an enclosed space increases the risk of possible infection. Consider shortening worship to reduce the length of group exposure.

Will you continue offering virtual online worship?

1. Yes, this is a good idea, as some will feel safer staying home and as the online community has grown during this time.
2. Sessions will need to consider how they will help balance the pastor's job duties to allow them sufficient time to continue providing online worship.

Christian Education

What are the risks associated with offering children's church?

1. Can you assure families that children will be protected while in a separate and usually smaller space?
2. Is this an opportunity to explore multi-generational worship in order to ensure the health and well-being of everyone in the congregation?

What's your plan for Sunday School curriculum?

1. Utilize online resources or distribute PDF versions of curriculum, especially for children.
2. Distribute PDF materials and/or links to Facebook, YouTube, or other online links to youth and adults. Schedule online opportunities for Christian education for all age groups.

Are you canceling camps and VBS, or delaying them until later this summer?

1. Consider virtual opportunities to offer this programming.
2. Let the health and well-being of volunteers, visitors, and children guide decisions around delaying or canceling group activities that usually have a lot of interaction. For instance, how do you have a Vacation Bible School craft station where each child only touches the craft supplies they need and everyone is practicing social distancing?
3. Plan for next year with the understanding that we may still need to be asking these questions.

Are you going to host other activities, meals, or special events?

1. Should be conducted using the CDC guidelines for attendance capacity (e.g. 10+, 50+, 100+) and conform to the same rubrics for best practices (e.g. wearing masks, maintaining social distancing, etc.) as are followed for a worship service.
2. If the guidelines or rubrics cannot be followed, events should be cancelled.

What are you going to do about larger group gatherings?

1. Larger group gatherings should continue to be held virtually until guidance from the CDC shows that such gatherings would not contribute to a spike in infections.
2. When larger gatherings are deemed advisable by the CDC, consider moving them into a larger space such as the fellowship hall.

Fellowship and Pastoral Care

Are you continuing to provide coffee hour? What about fellowship time before and after services?

1. Are these elements essential to the community if they increase the risk to those who have gathered?
2. If the session decides to include any of these elements, what precautions will be taken to minimize risk?
3. If included, all coffee stations should be serviced by a volunteer with mask and gloves: no self-serve stations for drinks or food should be allowed.
4. Only individually wrapped food items that are distributed by a volunteer with mask and gloves should be allowed.
5. Tables should be spaced out to maintain social distancing and the number of chairs per table minimized / limited.
6. Special attention should be taken to sanitizing and sterilizing any area where people gather to eat and drink both before and after the gathering.

How will you deal with the rise of COVID-19 related addictions or domestic violence?

1. Pastors should discuss openly the reality of addictions, inviting concerned members to discuss confidentially and seek an appropriate referral to a mental health provider.

Property and Administration

What are you doing now to sanitize and sterilize your church building? What's your strategy to clean and sanitize your church in real time?

1. "Cleaning Teams" need to be established to sanitize all rooms before and after every gathering.
2. Members of cleaning team should roam the area and/or be stationed at key points of contact (e.g. doors, stair rails, etc.).
3. What plans will you have in place as other groups resume use of the building? What policies regarding building use will you require that they follow to provide for proper cleaning and social distancing?
4. Does the configuration of the bathrooms require thinking through touch points or other considerations?
5. How will you manage the flow of people into and out of the building to reduce the likelihood of creating choke points at doorways and other thresholds? Are you able to create one-way paths so that people enter through one door and exit through a different door?

Do you have a plan for reducing expenses if your church's offerings don't rebound?

1. Finance and administration committees should be meeting virtually now to discuss the Fall 2020 and Annual 2021 budgets to project a best, middle, and worst case scenario.

Should you be investing in new digital equipment right now?

1. This is a good idea, if funds allow. Ask colleagues in other churches what is working for them, and then find the best value for your dollars.
2. Keep in mind the best technical solution is useless if it is beyond the capabilities of your volunteers. Invest in the best solution your congregation can capably use and also afford.

What about supplies to assist in re-opening the building?

1. You will need to ensure that sufficient sanitizing and cleaning supplies are on hand so that there is no disruption to the procedures agreed to as part of re-opening. If the supplies are not available, then the building should remain closed.
2. Consider a plexiglass barrier between the preacher and worship leaders and the congregation to reduce the spread of aerosolized droplets from speaking and/or singing.
3. A supply of masks and gloves will need to be on hand.

What is your plan if/when volunteers step down?

1. Limit the number of activities that are resumed.
2. Phase the return of activities slowly, gradually, to allow for periodic disruption of ordinary services.
3. Be realistic about the toll on volunteers related to repeated sanitization of touch points throughout any gatherings, the need to turn people away based on group size restrictions or on lack of appropriate face mask, and the increased risk for those who take on these tasks.

Will new volunteer positions emerge from COVID-19? Here are some possibilities:

1. Technical coordinators.
2. Deacons for online community.
3. Virtual education coordinators.

Because people may return very slowly to church, how will you count attendance and effectiveness?

1. Count however you wish—be consistent and articulate the means of counting (e.g. number of online devices viewing, number of online devices x assumption of 2.5 persons).
2. Can you find a means to know who is viewing your service in such a way that you can connect with them? It's the *connection* that matters more than the *number*.