

24 Questions Your Church Should Answer Before People Return

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This week we all received good news from our president: the country is going to slowly reopen, and that includes houses of worship. Here are 24 questions your church should answer before people return.

I can guarantee that we will not go back to “business as usual” as a country, and that includes our churches. If you think we’ll all rush back to church and pick up where we left off, don’t kid yourself – it’s not going to happen. Or at least it *shouldn’t* happen. We need to think and plan carefully so we do not endanger people simply because we let our guard down and believed that the [Coronavirus crisis](#) had passed. Now, as believers let’s agree to live by faith and not operate in fear, but let’s also agree to be proactive and to act in wisdom towards our members and guests, especially those among us who are most susceptible to becoming infected with [COVID-19](#).

We have a short time to prepare for the return of the church to the church campus. As I have thought about my church, and listened to friends and ministry experts over the past several weeks, I’ve compiled a list of things that most of our churches are not thinking about. Don’t let the excitement of finally coming back together cloud your judgment or cause you to ignore the “new normal.”

Let’s think through 20+ things that we must think about before people return to the building:

What if your worship gathering is initially limited to no more than 100 people? Never happen, you say? Remember that we’ve been limited to gatherings of no more than 10 people in the recent past. Take my church, for example. Pre-COVID 19 we averaged 350 in worship (two services). Should we be planning on adding a third service, reducing the time to 45 minutes with a 15 minute “passing period” so that worshipers can either go to Bible study or go home? One friend in ministry has said, “My church runs 2000 people in worship

– we can't have 20 worship services all weekend long! What will we do?" If we are limited to a smaller number of people by our government leaders, what's the plan at your church to provide a place and time for them to worship?

What adjustments will you make to the Lord's Supper, baptisms, and your choir ministry? Do you believe you can conduct communion like you have in the past? Your church's tradition may involve passing a plate of elements, or it may include drinking from a common cup in some denominations. Will you use the self-contained juice and cracker cups? What about baptism – it's going to be impossible to practice physical distancing in a baptism pool. And as one reader said, "What do I do about my church's choir program?" He realizes that people standing side-by-side won't be practical.

How will you go forward with VBS? This is a question on people's minds. There are practical alternatives, and I know many churches that are going to find new times and ways to provide a VBS experience.

Is a physical "pass the plate" offering a thing of the past? How would you feel if you were the 100th person in a worship service to touch the offering plate that 99 other people just touched? Would you be worried about COVID-19 transmission? Sure you would. So how will you take up your weekly offering? Will you install boxes at the doors of the worship center, and perhaps place some of those in the lobby, so that worshipers can slide their envelopes, cash, or checks into those secured boxes?

What are you doing now to sanitize and sterilize your church building? Now is the time to wipe down all classrooms (especially those where children meet because of the toys and other items they touch during the course of a Sunday or Wednesday class experience). Have you sprayed pews and chairs with disinfectant? Who is wiping door knobs and handles? Have you had carpet cleaned and disinfected? Now is the time for all this to take place, not the week of the "you can go back to church" announcement by government officials.

Are you going to continue offering children's church? As a short-term alternative, family worship be encouraged as *the* primary option in these COVID-19 days? Should parents take their kids to worship, practice physical distancing, and keep a close eye on their little ones?

Are you going to continue hosting special events? Will your church continue to host weddings? How about funerals? Revivals? You get the idea – there are a number of special events that our churches might host. Which ones will continue, and which ones will be put on hold? And how will you explain which ones continue and which ones don't?

Are you continuing to provide coffee stations on campus? Many churches have invested serious dollars in creating a coffee shop experience. My church has a coffee station in the center of our foyer (a self-serve station). Is that a good idea anymore? Tables and chairs may need to be placed in storage so that people don't congregate within a couple of feet of one another.

Will you continue offering virtual online worship? Some churches may think of their recent foray into Facebook Live as a means to provide a worship experience for their people a thing of the past – a stop-gap measure during some really strange days. Happy they can meet together again, Facebook Live services may give way to worship experiences on campus. But is that the right strategy? I have heard of church after church whose leaders tell me their worship attendance and group attendance are up – significantly – because people are finding them online. It was reported that one Hispanic church in Las Vegas, Nevada, had 1300 people watch their service online a few weeks ago. Why is that a big deal? They normally average 100 on campus.

What is your plan when volunteers step down? I'm already hearing that older volunteers are telling their church leaders they aren't coming back to teach until a vaccine is readily available – it's just too risky for them because they are most at risk from COVID-19. Will you be able to fully staff your classes like you did back in February?

What's your strategy to clean and sanitize your church in real time? It's one thing to prepare in advance of when people return to the church building, but how will you keep the place clean and disinfected on a Sunday or Wednesday? Does this give rise to a new team of people on campus whose ministry it is to walk around wiping door knobs and other surfaces? Who is going to clean restrooms throughout the morning or evening? Remember you'll have hundreds (some of your churches may have thousands) of people touching things while they are on campus

Do door greeters do their jobs differently, or at all? Not have door greeters? Seriously?! We've always had door greeters. But in a COVID-19 world, do you really want a door greeter holding the door open while a parishioner walks by within a foot or two of them? That's not in line with good physical distancing practices given to us by the CDC and our state governments. The new normal may be for greeters to stand back six feet, inside the church building, and welcome people verbally without opening the door for them. You experience that at big box stores now. A greeter is there to say hello, but they don't make you pass within a foot of them! Welcome to the new world COVID-19 has created.

Is this the time to suspend or end your church's "meet and greet" time? Because of physical distancing rules, it probably is – at least temporarily. This practice has been on the decline in recent days, and many churches have already abandoned it because of its ineffectiveness with guests, not because of COVID-19 concerns.

Because when people return it may happen very slowly, how will you count attendance and effectiveness? The question has already been raised about should we or should we not take attendance during online worship and online group Bible studies. It's almost a sure thing that worship attendance on campus will not be what it was pre-COVID-19. You need to decide now if you're going to count on-campus only attendance, or merge and add online attendance, too. And how will group leaders take a count in their online groups and go about reporting that?

Should you add and/or shorten worship services to allow for social distancing? I touched on this in #1 above, but let's drill down a bit. If physical gatherings are limited in size, you have a few options: (1) offer more services (2) encourage people to continue worshipping online (3) remove chairs from your worship center to help people avoid close contact (4) block off pews so that people no longer sit right behind someone, reducing the chances of them sneezing or coughing directly into the back of the person in front of them. If your church reopens with the "worship only" option, you'll have to decide these things now.

What are you going to do about larger Sunday School groups? No one is going to want to sit in a crowded room for Bible study, yet so many of our classes have been allowed to grow to have very large attendance. Do you feel

good about letting 25 or more senior adults meet in a room that holds, well, 25 or 30 senior adults? If you have space to start new groups, now is the time – help people spread out. But if your church is out of space, like mine is, what's the next step?? One option is to start another hour of Sunday School. For my church, we'd go from two hours to three. Yours might go from one hour to two. Or another option is to place some groups online while others remain on campus. There's not going to be a quick and easy solution to this.

What's your plan for Sunday School curriculum? Most churches have provided print products – we call them Personal Study Guides (for group members); some adults still refer to them as “quarterlies” because they are distributed at church at the beginning of a new quarter. But because of social distancing and the new emphasis on virtual groups, should you keep print products but add digital ones for those groups meeting off campus? Thankfully, my company, LifeWay, creates digital versions of all its ongoing Bible study products, so we can meet whatever demand the church has. I have been providing print products at my church, but I'm about to add digital so my groups can be flexible in meeting on or off campus.

Will you reopen the doors of your church with a “worship only” strategy? I am hearing of more and more churches that are choosing this option whenever we are allowed to meet again on campus. They are adding services, removing chairs, practicing social distancing, and focusing on regaining momentum in worship. Bible study groups will remain online for safety in the short-term, and will be added back to the on-campus experience in time.

Do you have a plan for reducing expenses if your church's offerings don't rebound? This is the time for a “budget scrub” – while offerings are still decent and expenses have been lower because of reduced activities. Churches need to be thinking, “What if...” – what if our offerings don't hold steady because of rising unemployment of members? Before people return to the building, every church needs a “plan B” strategy just in case giving drops in late summer or early fall. I have friends in ministry that I deeply respect who believe we (the church) have not felt the financial impact of COVID-19 like we will in the days and months ahead. I think they may be right.

How will you deal with the rise of COVID-19 related addictions? One mental health expert said in a webinar meeting last week, “I'm hearing that

porn sites are giving away free memberships during COVID-19...just what people don't need." In that same webinar last week on mental health, the presenter assured the audience that substance abuse is on the rise, too. Alcohol sales are soaring. He cautioned us to be ready to do lots of counseling and referring of people to professionals in our post-COVID 19 reality.

Are you going to decrease the fellowship time between on-campus worship services? Some churches that have multiple services and Sunday School hours schedule up to 30 minutes of time between those events because they value the opportunity to gather, have coffee, and fellowship. In a COVID-19 world, it is a good idea *not* to let that happen. Shorter times between worship services, and the elimination of coffee bar areas (yes, I know....it's sacrilege to think about not having coffee stations around the building!) will help keep people moving to their next destination, a worship service or a Bible study group, and it will help reduce the "let's hang out and give each other COVID-19."

Are you going to postpone mid-week Wednesday night services, meals, and Bible studies? This won't be a forever thing, but in the near future following when people return to the buildings, will you continue a virtual, online prayer meeting and Bible study time? Can you find volunteer workers to support a Wednesday night strategy on campus? Do you want to put people around tables for the traditional mid-week meal on Wednesday nights?

Should you be investing in new digital equipment right now? Yes, we've all hopped online and used Facebook Live to broadcast our worship services. Some of us are doing that with iPads and other devices, but is this the time to admit that online worship is probably here to stay? If yes, then it makes sense to invest dollars now so that cameras and other equipment can be purchased that will help the church be more professional in the new online world of worship.

Will a new staff or volunteer position emerge from COVID-19? Because the church has permanently moved online now, could it lead to the adoption of a new position of leadership? Will churches turn their attention to a Virtual Pastor whose job it is to oversee the technical aspects of the new digital frontier? Will they become responsible to develop groups and strategies to reach people online? It's highly likely that this is going to take place; the role may first be added to a staff person who is currently serving the church, but when it is

possible to split that role and afford a new person, churches may hire online pastors.

This list of questions is not exhaustive. It's representative of many things we should be thinking about right now, before we get the OK from government leaders to gather again.

What would you add to this list of questions to ask before people return to church? What have I left out? Let's pool our experience and wisdom to help Jesus' bride be prepared for the new world we find ourselves in. I'd love for you to respond to this post, share your thoughts, and then share it in social media. We've got to get the church thinking and talking about these things.