

24 Questions to Ask Before Your Church “Reopens”

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Last week we all received good news: The country is going to slowly reopen, and that includes houses of worship.

But 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 don't endanger people simply because we let our guard down and believed that the coronavirus crisis had passed.

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 toward 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've thought about my church and listened to friends and ministry experts over the past several weeks, I've compiled a list of things most of our churches aren't thinking about.

Don't let the excitement of finally coming back together cloud your judgement or cause you to ignore the "new normal."

Let's think through some issues before the church returns to the building:

1. 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. Before COVID-19 we averaged 350 in worship (two services).

Should we plan to add a third service, reducing the time to 45 minutes with a 15-minute "passing period" so worshipers can either go to Bible study or go home?

One friend in ministry said, "My church runs 2,000 people in worship. We can't have 20 worship services all weekend long! What will we do?"

If we're 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?

2. 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 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 people standing side by side won't be practical.

3. How will you go forward with VBS?

This is a burning question on church leaders' and parents' minds.

There are practical alternatives, and I know many churches are going to find new times and ways to provide a VBS experience.

4. 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 worshipers can slide their envelopes, cash or checks into those secured boxes?

5. 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.

Have you sprayed pews and chairs with disinfectant? Who is wiping doorknobs 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.

6. Are you going to continue offering children's church?

As a short-term alternative, can 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?

7. 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 decide -- and explain -- which ones continue and which ones don't?

8. 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 self-serve coffee station in the center of our foyer.

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.

9. Will you continue offering online worship?

Some churches may think of their recent foray into Facebook Live worship experiences as a thing of the past -- a stop-gap measure during some really strange days.

Happy they can meet together again, churches may dissolve Facebook Live services as they return to worship experiences on campus. But is stopping online worship services altogether the right strategy?

I've heard of church after church whose leaders tell me their worship attendance and small group attendance are up significantly because people are finding them online.

One church in Las Vegas had 1,300 people watch their service online a few weeks ago. Why is that a big deal? They normally average 100 on campus.

10. 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 serve until a vaccine is readily available; it's just too risky for them because they're most at risk from COVID-19.

Will you be able to fully staff your classes like you did back in February?

11. What's 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 a Sunday or Wednesday?

Does this give rise to a new team of people on campus whose ministry it is to walk around wiping doorknobs and other surfaces? Who's going to clean restrooms throughout the morning or evening?

Depending on your church size, you may have hundreds -- or maybe even thousands -- of people touching things while they're on campus.

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

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 Center for Disease Control 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 this 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.

13. 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.

14. Because people may return very slowly to church, 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 before 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?

15. Should you add and/or shorten worship services to allow for social distancing?

I touched on this in the first question above, but let's drill down a bit.

If physical gatherings are limited in size, you have a few options:

-- Offer more services

-- Encourage people to continue worshiping online

-- Remove chairs from your worship center to help people avoid close contact

-- Block off pews so that people no longer sit right behind someone, reducing the chances of their 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.

16. 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 many of our classes have a 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 add another time slot for Sunday School. For my church, we'd go from two time slots to three. Yours might go from one class time to two.

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.

17. 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?

LifeWay creates digital versions of all its ongoing Bible study products, so we can meet whatever demand the church has.

I've been providing print products at my church, but I'm going to add digital so my groups can be flexible in meeting on or off campus.

18. Will you reopen the doors of your church with a "worship only" strategy?

I'm hearing of more and more churches choosing this option whenever we're allowed to meet again on campus.

They're 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.

19. 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 about the "what ifs," as in "What if our offerings don't hold steady because of rising unemployment among members?"

Before the congregation returns 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 I deeply respect who believe we (the church) haven't felt the financial impact of COVID-19 like we will in the days and months ahead.

I worry they may be right.

20. 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 told 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.

21. Are you going to decrease the fellowship time between on-campus worship services?

Some churches with multiple services and Sunday School hours schedule a break of as much as 30 minutes between events because they value the opportunity to gather, have coffee and fellowship.

In a COVID-19 world, it's a good idea not to let that happen.

Shorter times between worship services and the elimination of coffee bar areas will help keep people moving to their next destination -- a worship service or a Bible study group.

22. Are you going to postpone a return to mid-week Wednesday night services, meals, and Bible studies?

This won't be a forever thing, but in the near future, following the return of the church to its buildings, will you continue an 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?

23. 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 online worship is probably here to stay?

If that's the case, it makes sense to invest now in the cameras and other equipment that will help the church be more professional in the new online world of worship.

24. Will a new staff or volunteer position emerge from COVID-19?

Because the church has permanently moved online, 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?

The role may first be added to a staff person who's currently serving the church, but when it's possible to split that role and afford a new person, churches may hire online pastors.

This is just the beginning

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? 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.

This article appeared in the "First Person" column of the Baptist Press, April 29 2020 titled "24 Questions Your Church Must Ask before welcoming people back".

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