

Opening Up America Again:¹ Outline and Analysis

Gating Criteria: phased approach based on data; mitigates reemergence; protects most vulnerable

Phase One:

- Downward trajectory in key metrics for 14 day-quarantine period
- Plans in place to test and trace Covid-19 cases
- Have the capability to ramp up medical supplies and ICU surge capacity

Phase Two:

- ...regions with no evidence of a rebound and that satisfy the gating criteria a second time.

Phase Three:

- ...regions with no evidence of a rebound and that satisfy the gating criteria a third time.

ANALYSIS: (1) The key phrases above are “downward trajectory” and “14-day quarantine period.” We are nowhere near either of these situations and some congregants are stirring to be able to resume “normal” activities; (2) based on these federal guidelines, churches should plan limited, gradual, resuming of activities; (3) Resuming activities will occur in phases/stages and not all at once; (4) Preliminary reports are the CDC may modify the 10+, 50+ guidelines to balance number of persons viz. size of the room as a better evaluation of appropriate numbers for gatherings—stay alert.

All Phases Guidelines—Individuals:

- Wash hands regularly
- Masks in public places
- Stay at home if feeling unwell

All Phases Guidelines—Employers:

- Social distancing continues
- Masks in public places
- Temperature checks
- Testing and contact tracing if your members get sick
- Disinfect high-traffic areas

ANALYSIS: (1) What churches can do: (a) social distancing, (b) masks in public, (c) disinfect high-traffic areas; (2) What churches may be helpful with: contact tracing, at least of our own member-to-member contact; (3) What churches may struggle with: temperature checks; (4) What is beyond churches: testing and contact tracing beyond the church.

Phase One—Individuals:

- Vulnerable members (60+ and those with underlying conditions) should shelter in place
- Gatherings of 10+ should be avoided unless precautionary actions taken:
 - Ability to social distance
 - Requirement to wear a mask
 - Limit contact with shared objects (e.g. doors, offering plates, etc.)
- Avoid socializing: no coffee hour / fellowship

Phase One—Employers:

- Encourage telework
- Close common areas (i.e. church offices should remain locked)
- Return to work in phases (e.g. staggered hours, days)
- Allow for special accommodations for vulnerable workers
- Churches: “Large Venues...can operate under strict physical distancing protocols.”

ANALYSIS: (1) Many within our churches may argue for resuming in-person worship during phase one but this does not seem advisable; (2) If any activities resume, strict compliance to safety precautions (e.g. wearing a mask, social distancing, “clean teams” for ongoing disinfectant of high traffic areas) must be enforced, with Session commissioning and training individuals on appropriate “social enforcement” protocols; (3) Anyone unwilling to follow the safety precautions should be asked to leave; (4) If church staff come into the office, the doors should remain locked with the church essentially not open to public or congregational traffic; (5) However, continued telework is preferable.

Phase Two—Individuals:

- Vulnerable members (60+ and those with underlying conditions) should shelter in place
- Gatherings of 50+ should be avoided unless precautionary actions taken:
 - Ability to social distance
 - Requirement to wear a mask
 - Limit contact with shared objects (e.g. doors, offering plates, etc.)

Phase Two—Employers:

- Encourage telework
- Close common areas (i.e. church offices should remain locked)
- Return to work in phases (e.g. staggered hours, days)
- Allow for special accommodations for vulnerable workers
- Churches: “Large Venues...can operate under moderate physical distancing protocols.”

ANALYSIS: (1) Phase two is the more appropriate time for churches to resume in-person activities; (2) Appropriate safety protocols and social enforcement are also necessary during phase two activities; (3) Small and mid-sized groups (e.g. choir, large Bible studies) that ordinarily meet in rooms sufficient for their number should be moved to larger rooms that will feel too large for the number of attendees (e.g. choir practice moved to the sanctuary, Bible study moved to the fellowship hall); Church offices should remain locked but may be open for congregational traffic.

Phase Three—Individuals:

- Vulnerable individuals can resume public interactions, but should practice physical distancing, minimizing exposure to social settings where distancing may not be practical, unless precautionary measures are observed.”
- Low-risk populations minimize time spent in crowded environments

Phase Three—Employers:

- Resume unrestricted staffing
- Churches: “Large Venues...can operate under limited physical distancing protocols.”

ANALYSIS: (1) As communities move into phase three, the temptation will be to revert to the “old normal.” However, continued vigilance and care is required during phase three; (2) Attention should be given to protect vulnerable people (60+ and underlying conditions), with spaces reserved that allow them to maintain social distancing, at least; (3) Anyone sitting in the “vulnerable” section should be asked to wear a mask, although in other areas mask wearing can be optional; (4) It is readily recognized that the large percentages of “vulnerable” in our congregations makes even phase three difficult.

Questions Your Church Should Answer Before People Return²

Worship

Will you reopen the doors of your church with a “worship only” strategy?

1. “Worship Only” is a misnomer, as online Bible studies, committee meetings and pastoral care will continue.
2. Yes, the first in-person gathering may be limited to worship, but not until phase two of the federal guidelines are met.
3. Be intentional and gradual about adding activities according to your congregation’s ability to maintain Covid-19 related precautions.

What if your worship gathering is initially limited to no more than 100 people?

1. Masks are required to be worn.
2. Every-other pew (or two pews, if needed) roped off.
3. Tape on pews / chairs to indicate where to sit in order to maintain social distancing.
4. Multiple services, even in smaller congregations.
5. Doors remain open for the entire morning, even in inclement weather, or gloved volunteers stationed at all doors.
6. Continue virtual worship as an alternative offering.
7. No printed bulletins: use PowerPoint if available or have liturgist “call out” the service as in pre-literacy eras.

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

Lord’s Supper

1. All communion by intinction; no passing plates.
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 shot glasses.

Baptisms

1. Have parents hold the child and distribute the water.
2. Pastor proclaims the Trinitarian formula as the parents apply the water to the baptized.

Choir Ministry

1. Begin with solos or married couple / partners duets.
2. Introduce quartets and small ensembles that allow for social distancing.
3. Have larger groups of singers stand around the sanctuary, while remaining socially distant (i.e. standing near a pew that is roped off).

Is this the time to end your church’s “meet and greet” time? What about the Passing the Peace?

1. Yes, end the “meet and greet,” especially during phase one and phase two of the federal guidelines.
2. Passing the Peace can be a liturgical response between pastor/liturgist and the congregation, without turning to one’s neighbor.
3. If the Passing of the Peace turns to one’s neighbor, alternative means should be used to convey the peace: “prayer hands” folded in front of one’s chest, “jazz hands,” or bowing are all appropriate.

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

1. Adopt the Walmart strategy: greeters do not shake hands, ever.
2. Practice social distancing.
3. Bulletins are not used and so not distributed. If used, bulletins are stacked on a table—greeters may remind guests to pick up their bulletin, if they desire.

Is a physical “pass the plate” offering a thing of the past?

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 add and/or shorten worship services to allow for social distancing?

1. Churches with small or full sanctuaries who need to add more services in order to maintain social distancing may need to shorten the service.
2. Define your priorities: less music, less preaching, less prayer, less announcements? What is the balance.

Will you continue offering virtual online worship?

1. Yes, this is a good idea, even after a vaccine is found.
2. Given #1 above, Sessions will need to consider what they will take away from the pastor’s job duties to allow her or him sufficient time to continue providing online worship.

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 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.)

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 is your plan 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. This is an opportunity to recruit: have the administration committee review volunteers’ job descriptions

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

1. Technical coordinator, perhaps.
2. Deacons for online community, perhaps.
3. Virtual education coordinator, perhaps.

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. Key question above is: 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* not that *number* that matters.

Children / Sunday School / Adult Education

Are you going to continue offering children's church?

1. Kids should stay with their parents.
2. Family worship is a historic Christian practice that leads to lifelong faith, and should be affirmed and reinstated beginning now.

What's your plan for Sunday School curriculum?

1. Affirm the historic Christian practice of parental responsibility of faith formation of their children.
2. Utilize online resources or distribute PDF versions of curriculum, especially for children.
3. Distribute PDF materials and/or links to Facebook, YouTube, or other online links to youth and adults.

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

1. Delay, delay, delay.
2. Postpone to fall or a mid-winter event.
3. Plan for next year.

Are you going to host Wednesday night services, meals, or special events?

1. Should be conducted using the CDC guidelines for attendance capacity (e.g. 10+, 50+, unlimited) 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 Sunday School groups?

1. Adult educational offering should be online, especially during phases one and two of the federal guidelines.
2. During phase three of the federal guidelines, consider moving larger groups into a larger space such as the fellowship hall. It will feel weird for a while, but folks will grow accustomed over time, as they are doing with Zoom meetings.

Fellowship and Pastoral Care

Are you continuing to provide coffee stations on campus? What about fellowship time between services?

2. Consideration should be given to cancelling this practice until a vaccine is found.
3. If continued, all coffee stations should be serviced by a volunteer with mask and gloves: no self-serve stations.
4. Tables should be spaced out to maintain social distancing and the number of chairs per table minimized / limited.

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

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.

¹ “Opening Up America Again,” U.S. Federal Guidelines released April 16, 2020.

² 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.