

Church Reopening Checklist

Overseed has compiled a list of issues and questions that churches should think through before re-opening post Covid-19.

1. **Get out of “either/or” thinking.** We tend to think in binary terms because it’s simpler, but the problem is that there are rarely only two options. The truth is there are many other options. Do not lock yourself in a box and kill your creativity, which is easy to do when you are tired and wrestling with areas that are out of the norm. Learn to first ask, “What are we not seeing” rather than quickly deciding which of the two options should we choose. When brainstorming ideas always list at least 3 options.

Also separate in your mind the means from the ends. The mission of the church and the Sunday gathering will not change but probably you will need to change the methods to accomplish those ends.

Are there medical professionals you can work with to help you develop best practices related to the health of your guests?

2. **Framework for thinking about impact of pandemic on your organization**

- **What hasn’t changed:** Even though you are navigating a season of unprecedented change, discover the anchors your church must stay connected to in order to thrive.
- **What has to change:** Your church will never be able to go back to “normal.” Learn which aspects of ministry will be changed forever, and how you can adapt.
- **What gets to change:** You have an unprecedented opportunity for your church to become the healthiest it has ever been. Learn how you can take advantage of this season and become a thriving church.
- **Four key areas that need addressed:**
 - Practical procedures and policies.
 - Finances. Budget adjustments and contingency plans.
 - Ministry models. Almost all of them have been disrupted.
 - Mission strategy. Think redemptively: spiritual (reconciliation to God), social (reconciliation to others), and cultural (reconciliation to what we do in the world and how we do it).
- **Timeframes:** Many predict this is going to be a year long dance.

3. **Develop Enhanced Cleaning Regimen**

- **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 a Sunday or other times). 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.
- **Checklist:** Create a specific cleaning checklist for every room.

- **Sanitizing Stations:** Strategically place sanitizing stations throughout your campus to encourage frequent handwashing. The more you emphasize cleanliness (in word and deed), the safer people will feel attending your church.
- **Masks:** Considering supplying masks for those without one to increase comfort levels.
- **What is 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 other times? 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 is going to clean restrooms throughout the morning or evening? Remember, you will have hundreds (some of your churches may have thousands) of people touching things while they are on campus.
- **Consider a temperature check** on all staff and volunteers.
- **Budget Implications:** 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.)
- **Communicate with congregation** about how you have prepared the church for their arrival. 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. Also urge those that are sick to join online instead.

4. **Sunday logistics:**

- Consider having people sign up (register) for which service they are attending to ensure adequate and safe seating.
- Bulletin needs to go. How will you communicate to congregants weekly information?
- Communion? Do you need to move to individually wrapped communion cups with bread? How will you distribute communion with social distancing?
- How will you enforce social distancing, to protect the more vulnerable in the congregation, especially before the service starts and after it ends.
- If you choose to keep your restrooms open (some state Governors are recommending keeping them closed), be sure to post signs about washing hands in bathrooms with appropriate guidelines to doing so.
- Are you going to decrease the fellowship time between on-campus worship services? Often churches with multiple services schedule up to 30 minutes of time between those events to provide 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 will help keep people moving to their next destination and help reduce the "let's hang out and give each other COVID-19."
- Only allow people from the same household to sit together. Space out other groups.
- Avoid passing microphones on the stage.
- Continue offering online giving options. Have stations in the church where people can drop offerings instead of passing a plate.
- Come up with a fun way to greet others in a no-contact way.
- Consider dismissing in an orderly way to ensure there is social distancing.

5. **Re-imagine Giving:** Is a physical "pass the plate" offering a thing of the past? You do not want a bunch of people touching the offering plate. So how will you take up your weekly offering? How can you best promote online giving? Are you tracking the percentage of giving that is online?

6. **Re-imagine Worship Seating Arrangements:** Be prepared for social distancing requirements to remain in place, even after churches are permitted to gather. Develop new ways to arrange seating that encourages social distance. Limit the number of people per pew. Space out chairs. Increase distance between rows of chairs. Get creative; find ways to use creative seating arrangements to your advantage.
7. **Consider additional Worship Services or Worship Venues.** Most likely your worship gathering is initially going to be limited to no more than x people. It will probably start with 10 and then move to 50? Even “smaller” churches that did not need multiple services pre-coronavirus may need to add worship services or venues to comply with state mandates.

Create contingency plans that minimize large gatherings. Maintain online services and offer prayer meetings throughout the week in order to phase in the community via smaller groups of people. Also, use technology to allow small groups to continue meeting. Continue to reach out to your members one-on-one, and via regular communication such as emailing a daily devotional.

Consider incorporating multiple services throughout the week to decrease the number of people attending at any one time. Remove chairs, practicing social distancing, and focusing on regaining momentum in worship.

You have limited options to maintain social distancing in the service: If social 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.

8. **Are you going to continue offering children’s church?** Problem is cannot guarantee moms and dads that their children will be absolutely safe in a room in which dozens or hundreds gather for a kids’ worship time. This is going to be a top concern for parents of younger children. They may view kids’ worship as a Petri dish into which they are throwing their children. Probably best to take your cue from what the public schools decide to do. As an alternative, is it time to encourage family worship as *the* primary option in these COVID-19 days? Should parents take their kids to worship, practice social distancing, and keep a close eye on their little ones?

If yes, Re-design Children & Youth Class Sizes and Times. Keeping kids from sharing germs is a near impossible task. However, we can minimize the spread of germs by reducing the size of individual classes. Re-think your past approach to children and youth classes. For example, you may need to suspend programming for older children to maximize your space for younger kids. Find ways to ensure classrooms are not overcrowded. Consider removing everything nonessential from the room to limit surfaces for potential contamination

- 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.
- Limit leaders in the preschool and children’s areas to those who do not have pre-existing conditions and to those under 65 years old.
- 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.
- Have only one person handle child check in stations and do not pass the check-in device.

- Consider moving the check-in station further away from the classrooms and do not parents past the check-in station.
 - Have a check list for what is been cleaned and when in each room.
 - Develop a list of procedures for your volunteers. Train them on this list through Zoom prior to the first meeting.
9. **Plan for New Traffic Patterns in and Around Your Facility.** To maximize social distancing, intentionally plan traffic patterns on your campus that minimize crowds and bottlenecks. Think through children’s check-in and check-out. How will people get from and to their cars? Create multiple coffee stations. Spread out your guest connection area. Be intentional about using multiple entrances and exits. Design and print signage to promote your new traffic patterns.
 10. **Develop a Logistics Plan for a “Second Wave.”** Every church should be prepared for additional shutdowns. Now that we have experienced this once, ask your leadership team, “How could we have been better prepared to pivot to online only?” Create a crisis logistics plan that you can implement within a few days. This way, you are ready if a second coronavirus wave forces additional shutdowns.
 11. **Will you continue offering virtual online worship?** Some may think this recent foray into Facebook Live was a stop gap measure during strange days. It will be tempting to dump the virtual service offering once you can meet back on the campus. But is that the right strategy? Many churches are finding their worship attendance and group attendance are up – significantly – because people are finding them online. The online campus is becoming the new foyer into the building. How can your church best minister in this new digital age?
 12. **What is your plan when volunteers step down?** Older volunteers should not be coming back to teach their preschool and kids’ classes until a vaccine is readily available. It is just too risky for them because they are most at risk from COVID-19. How will you be able to fully staff your classes like you did back in February? If you cannot find enough volunteers (younger families may be hesitant to return because of the fear of exposing their children to COVID-19, which means their parents won’t be leading younger children’s groups), what will you do?
 13. **What are you going to do about larger Sunday School type groups?** Most are not going to want to sit in a crowded room for Bible study or Sunday School. What 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 so you can help people spread out. But if your church is out of space, what is the next step?? One option is to place some groups online while others remain on campus. There is not going to be a quick and easy solution to this.
 14. **What’s your plan for Sunday School curriculum?** Most churches provide print products for group members. Distributing printed products runs the risk of caring the virus, so you will need to switch to digital ones or online docs.
 15. **Do door greeters do their jobs differently, or at all?** Should you not have door greeters? 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? 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.

How do you continue to be a friendly church? How do you get visitor contact information? How will the church continue to have and develop a personal intimate fellowship when you are having conversations six feet apart? Can't really yell, so how is your cancer treatment going?

16. **Is this the time to end your church's "meet and greet" time?** Yes, because of social distancing rules. 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.
17. **People may return very slowly to church; how will you count attendance and effectiveness?** How should you take attendance during online worship and online group Bible studies? It is 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 are 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? Good article on this: <https://careynieuwhof.com/some-awkward-questions-about-how-to-measure-online-church-attendance-5-growth-strategies/>
18. **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 lowered because of reduced activities. Churches need to be thinking, "What if..." – what if our offerings do not hold steady because of rising unemployment of members? Before the church returns to the building, every church needs a "plan B" strategy just in case giving drops in late summer or early fall. The church may not see the financial impact of COVID-19 until the days and months ahead. Moving congregants to online giving is a critical strategy.
19. **How will you deal with the rise of COVID-19 related addictions?** Unfortunately, "porn sites are giving away free memberships during COVID-19". Just what people need. Substance and physical abuse are on the rise. Alcohol sales are soaring. The church needs to be ready to do lots of counseling and referring of people to professionals in our post-COVID 19 reality.
20. **Re-focus Your Programming on the Essential:** Your church has an unprecedented opportunity to streamline your calendar and ministries. Take the time now to consider which of your programs, ministries, and events are actually fruitful in making and maturing disciples. Think critically about which ministries are truly primary. Then, plan to only restart those ministries that are essential once in-person meetings are permitted. Also, are there ministries that could or should continue as virtual?
21. **Invest in Communications Tools for Leaders & Members.** Clear and reliable communication is central to any church's success in this crisis. Given that circumstances can change rapidly, your church needs better systems for communication. Invest money in a good Church Management Software and invest time in training leaders and members in how to use it. Leverage social platforms to enhance good communication.
22. **Consider investing in new digital equipment right now.** Most churches have hopped online and used Facebook Live to broadcast their worship services. Many are using their 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.

23. **Will a new staff or volunteer position emerge from COVID-19?** IF the church permanently moves online, should it lead to the adoption of a new position of leadership? A Virtual Pastor whose job it is to oversee the technical and shepherding 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.
24. **Develop Ministries to Meet Community Needs.** Your community has never been more open to the gospel than they are right now. People are contemplating deep, profound questions about life and spirituality. They are hurting and need both physical and spiritual care. Form ministries that reach people at their point of deepest need. Meet the felt, physical needs--and point your community to the gospel.

Note: This list was collated from these resources:

- <https://kenbraddy.com/2020/04/18/20-questions-your-church-should-answer-before-people-return/>
- *Ready to Reopen Checklist* from the Malphurs Group
- <https://gabaptist.org/reopening-your-church-building/>
- <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2020/april/what-relaunching-church-might-look-like-over-next-312-month.html>
- <https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/>

White House Guidelines for Reopening America Again

- Proposed state or regional gating criteria* (satisfy before proceeding to phased opening)
 - Symptoms cases**
 - Downward trajectory of influenza-like illnesses reported within a 14-day period and
 - Downward trajectory of covid-like syndromic cases reported within a 14-day period
 - Cases**
 - Downward trajectory of documented cases within a 14-day period and
 - Downward trajectory of positive tests as a percent of total tests within a 14-day period (flat or increasing volume of tests)
 - Hospitals**
 - Treat all patients without crisis care and
 - Robust testing program in place for at-risk healthcare workers, including emerging antibody testing
- *State and local officials may need to tailor the application of these criteria to local circumstances (e.g., metropolitan areas that have suffered severe covid outbreaks, rural and suburban areas where outbreaks have not occurred or have been mild). Additionally, where appropriate, governors should work on a regional basis to satisfy these criteria and to progress through the phases outlined below.
- **Guidelines for all phases: employers**
 - Develop and implement appropriate policies, in accordance with federal, state, and local regulations and guidance, and informed by industry best practices, regarding:
 - Social distancing and protective equipment
 - Temperature checks
 - Testing, isolating, and contact tracing
 - Sanitation
 - Use and disinfection of common and high-traffic areas
 - Business travel
 - Monitor workforce for indicative symptoms. Do not allow symptomatic people to physically return to work until cleared by a medical provider.
 - Develop and implement policies and procedures for workforce contact tracing following employee covid+ test.
- **Phase one: Strick Distancing**
 - Note: for states and regions that satisfy the gating criteria
 - **Individuals**
 - All vulnerable individuals* should continue to shelter in place. Members of households with vulnerable residents should be aware that by returning to work or other environments where distancing is not practical, they could carry the virus back home. Precautions should be taken to isolate from vulnerable residents.
 - All individuals, when in public (e.g., parks, outdoor recreation areas, shopping areas), should maximize physical distance from others. Social settings of more than 10 people, where appropriate distancing may not be practical, should be avoided unless precautionary measures are observed.
 - Avoid socializing in groups of more than 10 people in circumstances that do not readily allow for appropriate physical distancing (e.g., receptions, trade shows)
 - **Employers**
 - Continue to encourage telework, whenever possible and feasible with business operations.
 - If possible, return to work in phases.

- Close common areas where personnel are likely to congregate and interact or enforce strict social distancing protocols.
 - Minimize non-essential travel and adhere to CDC guidelines regarding isolation following travel.
 - Strongly consider special accommodations for personnel who are members of a vulnerable population.
 - Specific types of employers
 - Large venues (e.g., sit-down dining, movie theaters, sporting venues, **places of worship**) can operate under strict physical distancing protocols.
- **Phase two: Moderate Distancing**
 - Note: for states and regions with no evidence of a rebound and that satisfy the gating criteria a second time
 - **Individuals**
 - All vulnerable individuals should continue to shelter in place. Members of households with vulnerable residents should be aware that by returning to work or other environments where distancing is not practical, they could carry the virus back home. Precautions should be taken to isolate from vulnerable residents.
 - All individuals, when in public (e.g., parks, outdoor recreation areas, shopping areas), should maximize physical distance from others. Social settings of more than 50 people, where appropriate distancing may not be practical, should be avoided unless precautionary measures are observed.
 - **Employers**
 - Continue to encourage telework, whenever possible and feasible with business operations.
 - Close common areas where personnel are likely to congregate and interact, or enforce moderate social distancing protocols.
 - Non-essential travel can resume.
 - Strongly consider special accommodations for personnel who are members of a vulnerable population.
 - Large venues (e.g., sit-down dining, movie theaters, sporting venues, **places of worship**) can operate under moderate physical distancing protocols.
- **Phase three: Limited Distancing**
 - Note: for states and regions with no evidence of a rebound and that satisfy the gating criteria a third time
 - **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 should consider minimizing time spent in crowded environments.
 - **Employers**
 - Resume unrestricted staffing of worksites.
 - Large venues (e.g., sit-down dining, movie theaters, sporting venues, places of worship) can operate under limited physical distancing protocols
- **Vulnerable Individuals Definition**
 - Elderly individuals.
 - Individuals with serious underlying health conditions, including high blood pressure, chronic lung disease, diabetes, obesity, asthma, and those whose immune system is compromised such as by chemotherapy for cancer and other conditions requiring such therapy.