GUIDELINES FOR RESUMING IN-PERSON SERVICES

We are (hopefully) nearing the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and public officials are beginning discussions about systematically lifting quarantine orders. So, (1) when should churches and other ministries reopen and (2) how can they prepare to do so safely? Below, you will find practical information and considerations to help you navigate the next phase of the pandemic.

QUESTION #1
WHEN SHOULD MY CHURCH OR MINISTRY REOPEN?

This question is a complicated one (no joke, Sherlock!) that involves Scriptural, legal and practical questions and the application of wisdom to a quickly changing situation. Our goal is to provide reliable information to assist ministry leaders in making sound decisions, and we are strong proponents of both Christian conscience (especially as it relates to pastors making decision for their congregations; Hebrews 13:17) and Biblical wisdom (Mark 10:16). So, here is a suggested analysis for your consideration:

Suggested Analysis for Reopening

#1 Consider Biblical Principles

We have found it helpful to keep these Biblical principles in mind while analyzing this issue:

- If government is operating in its Biblical role of restraining evil and promoting good, then Christians should follow government's guidance (I Peter 2:13-14).
- Though many churches have temporarily canceled gatherings, the in-person assembly of believers for worship, discipleship, and fellowship is an essential Biblical requirement that cannot be canceled long-term (Hebrews 10:25).
- If a scenario is complex or unclear, Christians should apply wisdom with a focus on the church's public witness (Mark 10:16; Matthew 5:16; Matthew 28:16-20).
- If government restrictions interfere with Biblical beliefs or practices, Christians should seek clarification and accommodation prior to practicing civil disobedience (Daniel 1:8-15; Esther 5:1-8; Romans 12:18) .
- If government is acting in direct contradiction to Biblical principles or in violation of its God-given authority, then Christians should follow God's commands (Acts 5:29).

To date, we have encouraged churches to temporarily cancel in-person services in an effort to slow the pandemic (recognizing the state's Biblical role in restraining a natural evil, such as a virus) and to evidence care and concern for their congregations and local communities (Matthew 5:16). However, we have strongly urged government officials to exempt drive-in services because such services pose little health risk, and the current stay-at-home orders (in most jurisdictions) do not prevent gatherings of less than ten. We expect that government restrictions on in-person meetings will be lifted systematically in the coming weeks, and we are encouraging churches to follow state guidance. That said, we respect the conscience of those that have arrived at a different application of these principles.

#2 Consider Government Orders, Legal Principles and Insurance Coverage

Churches are generally categorized as public assemblies alongside movie theaters, sit-in restaurants, in-person court hearings and most government meetings. We acknowledge the many apparent inconsistencies in such classifications; and, some of the current federal lawsuits over government bans on in-person services may be successful. **But, our strongest argument to date is that churches should be opened along with other public assemblies.** In sum, carefully track the federal, state and local orders or guidance affecting churches and other public assemblies and connect with your local and state officials about the importance of lifting quarantine orders as soon as possible. Further, ministries should contact their insurance provider and ask about coverage issues related to reopening.

#3 Prioritize the Needs of Your Ministry and Community

Much of the focus right now is on government officials, but church and ministry leaders must make similar decisions about reopening. Church and ministry leaders must determine, based on available medical evidence and the needs of their ministry, whether they should reopen even if the government quarantine orders are lifted. For many, this will be an easy decision. But, especially for larger ministries and for ministries in high-infection areas or with a large number of at-risk congregants, this decision will be more difficult. A longer phase-in or reopening plan may be best for these ministries.

QUESTION #2
WHAT ARE THE BEST PRACTICES FOR REOPENING?

Here are a few practical thoughts on reopening, which will probably occur in three phases as described in the White House's Guidelines for Opening Up America Again. Please note that these suggestions are subject to change and that we defer to your conscience and the religious practices of your church in implementing these suggestions.

Planning Considerations

- Check with your insurance carrier.
- Review the latest guidance from the CDC, the state Department of Health, and local government and health officials.
- Develop an initial plan with ministry leaders, and order supplies now since PPE and sanitization supplies are in high-demand.
- Develop a communications strategy to be published via social media, email and other channels of communication.
- Some larger churches are considering a staggered reopening in the following order: (1) off-campus Bible studies/small groups, (2) on-campus Bible studies/small groups and (3) in-person services.
- Nursery, children's ministry and student ministry are generally discouraged from meeting during Phase 1.
- Social distancing and other CDC guidelines (face masks, hand sanitizer, hand washing, etc.) must be followed.
- Ask at-risk individuals to participate in on-line services during Phase 1, or consider scheduling a separate service for healthy at-risk individuals.
- Anyone that has been in contact with an infected person or exhibits symptoms should be encouraged to participate via online services only.
- Consider staggering services by name (for example, A-M and then N-Z) or utilize an online reservation system to ensure that social distancing requirements are followed.

Prior to In-Person Gatherings

- Deep clean facilities according to CDC guidelines.
- Discard all paper bulletins and other printed materials.
- Consider using a stationary offering collection box instead of offering plates.
- Consider alternate methods for administering church ordinances (such as individualized, prepackaged communion materials served by ushers with gloves and masks).
- Post signs giving notice of the above restrictions outside and inside.
- Greeters should be stationed 6-10 feet away from doors, and doors should be propped open if practical to avoid contact with door handles.
- Prior to entering the building, attendees may be asked if they are experiencing COVID-19 related symptoms, if they have tested positive or have been diagnosed with COVID-19, and if they have been in close contact with someone diagnosed with COVID-19. Greeters should be prepared to encourage any individual that exhibits symptoms or answers yes to the questions above to worship at home.
- Ministries may also consider temperature checks via an infrared thermometer (or, ministries can ask attendees to check their temperature at home).
- Provide masks, gloves and hand sanitizer to all attendees if these materials are available.
- Coffee and food service is an increased risk.
- Mark off or otherwise indicate socially distanced seats for family units and attendees. Here's a good rule of thumb to follow: two seats between family units and at least one row in front and behind each family unit.
- Increase ventilation by opening windows or using fans, etc. if weather permits.
- Request that attendees use the restroom at home prior to attending church.

During In-Person Gatherings

- Announce the latest CDC social distancing guidelines.
- Only individuals that live in the same household should sit together.
- Personal contact should be discouraged, and greeting times (shaking hands, etc.) should be discontinued for now.
- Consider pausing choir or large group musical performances due to infection risk.
- Nursery, children's ministry and student ministry are discouraged during Phase 1. However, if your church decides to hold these ministry events, ensure that CDC guidelines are followed.

During In-Person Gatherings (cont.)

- Encourage the use of cloth face coverings at all gatherings by everyone except children under 2 (and those preaching, presenting or singing).
- Consider the use of a sanitation team to clean common areas during in-person gatherings.
- Request limited use of the restrooms (if possible).
- Consider holding services and gatherings in a large, well-ventilated area or outdoors, as circumstances allow.

After In-Person Gatherings

- Structure dismissal according to sections and request that attendees leave the building without congregating in the lobby or other common areas.
- Sanitize the facility according to CDC guidelines prior to the next gathering.

If An Attendee Becomes Sick

- Identify a separate room or space where a sick individual can be taken for monitoring, and develop a plan for transporting a sick individual to their home or to a medical facility.
- Notify local health officials if an individual diagnosed with COVID-19 has been in your building and communicate with staff and attendees about the potential health risk while complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act and other confidentiality requirements (generally, an employer must have consent from a sick employee before sharing that employee's identity with other staff.)
- Encourage anyone exposed to a person diagnosed with COVID-19 to stay home, self-monitor for symptoms, and follow CDC guidance if symptoms develop.
- Close off areas used by the sick individual and do not use the area until after cleaning and disinfection; wait 24 hours to clean and disinfect to reduce risk to individuals cleaning.
- Advise sick staff and congregants not to return to the facility until they have met CDC’s criteria to discontinue home isolation.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, these guidelines are subject to change. And, ministry leaders should be prepared for a second round of closings if a "second wave" of the coronavirus develops later this year. We will continue to monitor developments related to COVID-19, and we will continue to pray for wisdom and effectiveness as church and ministry leaders navigate this crisis. Please contact us if you have any questions about this resource. The best method is by email to josh@hoosierfamily.org.

Note/Disclaimer

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