

# GUIDE TO REOPENING CHURCH SERVICES

A Step-by-Step, Biblically-Based  
and Research-Based Approach to  
Resuming In-Person Ministries



Kent Annan, M.Div.  
Jamie Aten, Ph.D.  
Nicolette Louissaint, Ph.D.

# Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	3
Chapter 2: Making a Bible-Based and Science-Based Plan	5
Chapter 3: A Step-by-Step Approach	9
Chapter 4: Implementing Safety Actions	13
Chapter 5: When to Move On to the Next Step	17
Appendix: Church Reopening Checklist	21
References and About	25

# Chapter 1. Introduction

*The Great Commandment states, “Love the Lord your God’... ‘Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37-39). During this pandemic, one way we express love for ourselves is in doing what we can to protect ourselves from getting infected. In the same way, one way we express love for our neighbor is in doing what we can to protect them from getting infected.*

In just a few months, this pandemic has dramatically changed our lives and turned our world upside down. The pain and anxieties it has caused around us are real. Additionally, as Christians we grieve the inability to meet in person with our church communities. We deeply desire to gather again. However, we must consider how to do so in safe ways that consider our most vulnerable neighbors and do not fuel the spread of COVID-19.

It is important for us to remember that the Church never actually closed, just the doors to our buildings. As Christ’s disciples, we are learning to live out our calling to worship, pray, encourage, witness, disciple, and serve in creative ways that minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission. We’ve gone online, moved our small groups to video chats, and found new ways to love our neighbors. We are still the people of God; we—not our buildings—are the real church.

Now, we enter a new phase of COVID-19 as restrictions loosen and businesses begin to reopen. Our churches face a set of difficult decisions: when to resume in-person ministries and how to carry out these ministries safely. Churches around the country are feeling pressure to rush these decisions.

## Four Commitments for Reopening

- **Humility:** Humbly examine your possible biases, influences, pressures, and your church’s strengths and weaknesses that could have a negative effect on your ability to make wise decisions.
- **Love:** Follow the biblical call to love your neighbor (Mark 12:31) in how and when you reopen your church and in-person ministries so that your actions help and do not inadvertently cause harm.
- **Persistence:** Mentally approach the process of reopening and helping your church navigate COVID-19 as a “marathon”—not a “sprint”—by keeping a long-term view in mind (e.g., Scripture talks about finishing the race, not being first in the race).
- **Wisdom:** Stay up to date on the latest information and scientific findings about COVID-19, track the number of local cases, and consult CDC interim guidance for faith communities as well as federal, state, and local guidelines for guidance.

Now as we look toward gathering again, with eagerness and gladness of heart (and perhaps some anxiety), we need to do so wisely.

Through this process, trust God's faithfulness and goodness while also being realistic about possible risks, threats, challenges, and complications from COVID-19. Keep in mind that reopening your church is more complicated than an open-or-closed decision, and it will likely be some time before things return to "church as usual" (i.e., back to pre-COVID-19 norms).

To help in this process, we designed this guide to serve your church leadership teams as an initial framework for how your church can come back together with wisdom that is guided by (1) God's love and love for neighbor and (2) best practices. We offer a step-by-step approach as well as a checklist to help the church live out its missional calling, meet the needs of its congregants, and protect the health of those in the church and in the community. We encourage you to start small with your plans to reopen your church's in-person ministry using the step-by-step approach outlined in this guide. Then slowly and deliberately increase involvement.

The COVID-19 pandemic in its present form will pass. One day we'll look back on this time and see clearly that God was with us and was working in our midst for good. Knowing this, we can turn to him today and ask him to give us the discernment, compassion, and faith to make the right decisions for our churches at this time.

Because what we know about COVID-19 and the challenges it presents are changing so rapidly, we encourage you to regularly visit [reopeningthechurch.com](https://reopeningthechurch.com), our website with the National Association of Evangelicals where we will regularly supplement this guide with resources as research and science progress. We also encourage you to regularly check our website for up-to-date and vetted information from other trusted resources.

See the Appendix: Church Reopening Checklist at the end of this manual for a detailed list of possible action items to consider implementing as part of your congregation's reopening plan.

*Prayer: God, guide us into and through this process with your wisdom and peace.*

## Chapter 2. Making a Bible-Based and Science-Based Plan

*“Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:18). This is a time for love put into wise action for ourselves, our families, our neighbors, our community, and our church. In these circumstances, we seek to be guided by God. This means that we must seek out biblical wisdom through the Scriptures to guide our actions. We should also use other means of knowing that God has given us—like science—to guide our COVID-19 reopening plans.*

Using both Scripture and the best available science to guide our actions improves the likelihood that we will effectively love our neighbors.

### Biblically-Based Discernment Approaches

In this season of COVID-19, there are immediate and pressing needs. God’s commandment to bring good news and healing to those who suffer is clear. As Christians, we are created in the image of a loving, merciful, and gracious God, a God whose son taught us to open our hearts and use our talents in service of the kingdom. But as we have learned from COVID-19, loving others well can also require us to make difficult decisions about closing and reopening the doors to our church buildings.

#### Action: Build on Theological Foundation

The way your church considers how and when to reopen in-person ministries during COVID-19 should be built on a strong theological foundation. However, we have found that a lot of churches have not connected the dots between their theology and how they are approaching the reopening process amidst COVID-19. Thus, we encourage you to draw on your church’s robust theological foundation for grappling with issues like fear, adversity, and helping others to help guide your church leadership committee’s decision on reopening and the best approaches to do so.

#### Action: Pray for God’s Guidance

Prayerfully reflect on how God might continue to guide your church in light of COVID-19 and considerations for the reopening process. Ask God to open your eyes to ways your church’s unique resources and current ministries might be used to aid in safely reopening in-person gatherings. Pray for guidance that your church leadership team would be wise in their decisions so as not to put the most vulnerable in your congregation and community at risk.

#### Action: Make Decisions in Community

Do not go about the decision-making process alone. Form a reopening team within your church, surround yourself with trusted and knowledgeable leaders, and consult medical and public health experts (including your local health department). As Christians, and as a church, you are part of one body with different gifts and roles. This metaphor also identifies the strength of collaboration. As the passage says, the “parts should have equal concern for each other” (1 Corinthians 12:25).

Throughout Scripture, we see examples of different churches working together as the full body of Christ when facing overwhelming challenges, and we would be wise to do the same during COVID-19. Working with other churches allows you to make connections locally, regionally,

and even perhaps nationally or globally. These connections allow you to share knowledge and resources and to learn from others. As you navigate reopening, talk with other pastors from churches in your area to discuss the possibility of working together.

## Scientifically-Based Mitigation Approaches

We also need to use scientific knowledge about this virus to prevent its spread in our churches. The church is a high-risk setting for COVID-19 transmission. There are examples where this has led to painful and cascading consequences for our churches and communities. Some people in our churches are at greater risk for serious complications from COVID-19, especially the elderly, those with chronic conditions, and even children. Therefore, churches should carefully consider when and how to resume in-person ministries and have a clear plan to do so.

### Action: Review COVID-19 Scientific Findings and Select Suggested Safety Actions

Research has shown church activities contain multiple factors that facilitate airborne COVID-19 spread. Below (see table) is a summary of what is known about how COVID-19 is transmitted, followed by suggested safety actions based on the best available scientific data available.

We recommend your church leadership committee use the table below as a starting place (remember, this is not a fully comprehensive list of all possible risk factors or safety actions) to identify possible risks in your church. Then select from the suggested safety actions that your church leadership committee plans on utilizing.

Factor facilitating transmission	Transmission risk in church activities	Suggested safety actions
Infectiousness of COVID-19 patient	An asymptomatic COVID-19 carrier participating could transmit the virus, but a symptomatic carrier is more infectious	Screen those with symptoms; use face masks (surgical masks or cloth masks, as appropriate)
Actions producing more respiratory droplets	Singing, laughing, talking (especially loudly), coughing, and physical activities that increase deep and rapid breathing	Use face mask when singing or talking, minimize unnecessary physical activities
Close proximity (<6 feet)	People sitting closer than 6 feet apart or facing each other	Maintain physical distancing of at least 6 feet; no face-to-face activity; sit in rows facing one direction; use face masks on all persons in close proximity (Note: Families who reside in one household can remain in close proximity to each other.)
Enclosed space with limited outside ventilation	Meeting frequently in smaller rooms, with low ceilings and no outside ventilation	Use larger rooms with high ceilings; open windows and doors; allow time to vent rooms and sanitize between use; meet outdoors; use face masks
Duration of contact	Meeting for longer than 30 minutes (definition of close contact); longer duration equals more risk	Minimize time by cutting non-essential activities; uni-directional flow for foot traffic; prompt and orderly entry and exit maintaining appropriate distances from one another
Increased social mixing	Gatherings including asymptomatic younger people with older people	Keep participants segregated by age groups; same people meeting regularly together reduces mixing

## What We Know About COVID-19

There is a rapidly expanding body of scientific knowledge about COVID-19. Experts agree that COVID-19 will be in the US for the foreseeable future, with fluctuating levels of infection in the community. Until a vaccine is available, the virus (SARS-CoV-2) and the disease will be a threat to our public health. Some of these recent insights are particularly relevant to churches as they consider how to resume in-person ministries:

- COVID-19 can be transmitted before a person develops symptoms. This explains why the virus spreads so easily and stealthily, greatly complicating efforts to contain its spread.
- Not every infected person will infect another person; factors that impact transmission include: infectiousness of the COVID-19 carrier, actions that increase the release of respiratory droplets and aerosols into the surrounding air, proximity to an infected person (within six feet is considered high risk), time spent in an enclosed environment with limited ventilation to the outside, amount of time spent with an infected person, and type of social network (e.g., intergenerational). In settings where a greater number of these factors are present, the risk of transmission will be higher..
- Because older people are more susceptible to contracting COVID-19 and children are less likely to display symptoms, intergenerational contact should be minimized to reduce COVID-19 transmission. It is important to note that children who have been infected have developed complications from COVID-19, so we must remain diligent to reduce exposure to children as well.
- Younger adults with common chronic conditions like hypertension, diabetes, and autoimmune disease also have an increased risk of serious complications. In fact, nearly 60 percent of COVID-19 hospital admissions in the US are for those under 65 years old.
- Several states have started to lift stay-at-home orders, even though their COVID-19 case counts remain high or have just started to decline. This will lead to an increase in transmission and new cases as individuals begin to resume activities which could increase their exposure. This increase can be mitigated by extensive testing, effective contact tracing, and quarantining of contacts. But no state yet has the testing capacity and the trained personnel to carry out effective tracing and quarantining.
- COVID-19 can spread from one state to another. As long as one part of the country has a poorly controlled epidemic, states that have significantly reduced their cases will remain vulnerable to COVID-19 spread from those areas. The same can be said of spread from one country to another.

### Chapter Actions:

- Build on theological foundation.
- Pray for God's guidance.
- Review COVID-19 scientific findings on church activities' transmission risks.
- Select from suggested safety actions to reduce COVID-19 transmission risks.
- Make decisions in community.
- Use Appendix: Church Reopening Checklist at the end of this manual.

*Prayer: God, help us listen intently for what you're asking us to do and plan realistically for what we can accomplish.*

## Chapter 3. A Step-by-Step Approach

*“They should collect all the food of these good years that are coming and store up the grain under the authority of Pharaoh...to be used during the seven years of famine that will come upon Egypt, so that the country may not be ruined by the famine” (Genesis 41:35-36). Joseph demonstrated wisdom in preparing for and then leading the way through a severe famine. Because of his careful preparation, Joseph could then provide what people needed. Though our focus is not food, a faithful response to COVID-19 involves planning and then managing through different stages of a crisis. Through these steps you can take a faithful approach to assessing needs, being good stewards, and witnessing to God’s love for our neighbors.*

Following is a four-step plan with modified activities that churches can use to resume in-person ministries. This plan can be dialed up or dialed down depending on the level of infection in the community. When adapting this plan to your church, it is important to adhere to local government guidelines. Therefore, the number of people allowed to gather in your plan may differ from this plan due to local restrictions.

Activity	Transmission Risk	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Small group gathering	Medium	<10 people, with face masks; fixed group; similar age group (no elderly)	Same as Step 1 except <15 people and elderly allowed, with no intergenerational mixing	Same as Step 2 except >15 people and face mask optional	Same as Step 3
Worship Service					
Size	Depends		<50 people; physical distancing; face mask required	<100 people; physical distancing; face mask required	>100 people; physical distancing; face mask optional
Singing	High		With face mask	With face mask	Face mask optional
Greeting	Medium/High				No handshake or hug
Offering/ Communion	Medium		Online giving; offering box; no passing of elements	Same as Step 2	Same as Step 3
Choir	High				
Sunday School/Fellowship					
Seniors	High				<20 people; face mask required; lecture-style seating
Adults	High			<20 people; face mask required; lecture-style seating	>20 people; face mask optional; lecture-style seating
Young adults/ College	High			Same as adult	Same as adult; face-to-face seating permitted with physical distancing
Middle/ High School	High			Smaller groups; face mask required; no senior help	Smaller groups; no senior help
Elementary school and younger	High				Smaller group; no senior help

### **Action: Live Out Our Missional Calling Through Small Group Gatherings**

As stay-at-home restrictions are loosened, gathering in small numbers will typically be allowed first. Therefore, small group gatherings should be the first in-person church activity to be implemented. Small group gatherings are a wonderful way to live out God's call for us. In small groups, we can build deeper relationships with each other, grow in God's Word, foster a safe environment for mutual accountability, and encourage one another to love and good works. These groups can reach out to many who would not want to enter a church building but would accept an invitation to a home. They can also help prepare for the start of in-person worship services by gathering each week for worship and then joining with other small groups to attend in-person worship when it resumes.

#### **Small Group Risk**

The risk for COVID-19 transmission in these groups is much lower. The risk can be further reduced by keeping group members constant and within the same age group. When infection in the community is still high, the use of face masks provides an added layer of protection. Because members know each other, they can quickly inform each other if a person develops COVID-19 symptoms. This will facilitate rapid self-quarantine by other group members.

### **Action: Meet Social, Emotional, and Spiritual Needs**

We all need human contact, but even in "regular time" our connections can sometimes feel superficial. This pandemic offers a chance to build deeper relationships. To reduce the risk of infection, we should reduce the number of people with whom we are in contact. Meeting only with the same group of people who are at the same life stage further reduces the risk of infection and can also help to meet our social, emotional, and spiritual needs. Visit [www.spiritualfirstaidhub.com](http://www.spiritualfirstaidhub.com) for more free resources, including our *Spiritual First Aid Manual: COVID-19 Edition*, tip sheets, and online courses.

### **Action: Provide Protection Against COVID-19**

When in-person ministries in the church resume, it is essential to observe a physical distance of at least six feet. Although physical distancing is usually observed at the individual level, it can be observed at the level of a social unit. For instance, those who live together as one social unit do not need to be physically separated at church. As a unit, they can be physically separated from other social units.

### **Importance of Face Masks**

Because anyone who walks into a church could be an asymptomatic spreader, putting a face mask on everyone entering the church can reduce the spread of the virus. To increase the proportion of face mask users, ask everyone (including leaders) to use them. This takes away the stigma and employs positive peer pressure to encourage use. It is important to note that not all masks are equal; surgical masks offer more protection than cloth masks, which are a hygiene tool and not protective equipment. If you do not have chronic conditions and are under 65, a cloth mask can be sufficient.

Churches should have a plan in place to explain the types of masks available, the ways to use masks, and a program to offer masks to the congregation for use.

### **Action: Support the Broader Effort to Contain COVID-19**

Because COVID-19 will be with us for the foreseeable future, transmission of this virus could occur during the resumption of in-person church activities. Therefore, for the safety of everyone in the congregation as well as their friends and neighbors, churches should be prepared to assist public health departments to identify and notify the contacts of people who discover they are infected. The first task is to rapidly identify all people who came in contact with the COVID-19 carrier who attended the church. Then, if requested, churches should be prepared to quickly notify these contacts so they can self-quarantine and be evaluated for COVID-19. This helps minimize further transmission even if these contacts were infected.

### **Minimizing COVID-19 Spread**

Speed is of the essence when it comes to contact identification and tracing. Your church should set up a system to collect information for all participants. Here are some suggestions for doing this:

- Keep a log of where each person sits. Assign seat and row number (or table number) to your sanctuary and meeting rooms.
- Register everyone entering a meeting. Record name, contact information, and where they are sitting. For each household, only one person needs to register, but ask them to list the number of people in the group.
- Maintain the record for at least three weeks.
- Have a designated person in the church responsible for maintaining the meeting registration, liaising with the public health department, and helping to identify and notify contacts if necessary.
- Have a plan to sanitize all spaces between gatherings.

**Chapter Actions:**

- Consider when and how to reopen small groups.
- Support each other socially, emotionally, and spiritually.
- Observe social distancing and protective guidelines in any reopening plans.
- Collaborate with public health departments.
- Use Appendix: Church Reopening Checklist at the end of this manual.

*Prayer: God, may we plan well, have patience with each other, and grow as a united body of Christ through the steps of again starting to meet and minister in person.*

## Chapter 4. Implementing Safety Actions

*“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1). We trust that God is our ultimate help. We also know that often the way God helps us is through each other. We need refuge and strength—and we need to be looking out for each other’s safety—in concerning and vulnerable times like this.*

Churches offer significant social support that enhances resilience, yet when it comes to COVID-19, these practices can actually put churches in a high-density outbreak region at greater risk. As central gathering places, churches need to think through how typical patterns of coming together put people at risk.

### Approach Planning Realistically

- **Individual Risk Management:** No matter how much we plan, people in disaster situations frequently underestimate risks and are predictably overconfident about the control they have over their environment.
- **Limited Control:** Church leaders cannot control the behavior of whoever might walk in the door. Even if we limit capacity and instruct people to sit six feet apart, people will naturally revert to old habits. Remember what is and is not in your control.
- **Logistical Concerns:** Distance between people is hard to enforce (think restrooms); not to mention the time- and labor-intensive task of maintaining clean surfaces.
- **Increasing Vulnerability:** Toddlers and some people with intellectual disabilities or dementia can’t be expected to follow the rules we choose to institute. Opening the church facility may also unwittingly put social pressure on those who are most vulnerable, like older adults and congregants with compromised immune systems, to come to church.

These factors mean there are challenges in creating a safe plan, but it’s not impossible. When we keep these in mind and follow planning, the checklist, and the most recent information from your denomination, the CDC, and the federal, state, and local government, we have a way to move forward with wiser, more realistic decisions and planning.

Some of the actions below should become part of our churches’ standard operation to promote a healthy environment for our congregants. For instance, even after the COVID-19 pandemic subsides, we still have the annual influenza season. However, the actions to promote physical distancing or use of face masks should be implemented to a greater or lesser degree depending on the level of COVID-19 infection in your community. This is why we suggest using a stepwise plan.

### **Action: Promote Healthy Hygiene Practices**

- Encourage use of a cloth face covering at all gatherings and when in the building by everyone except children aged less than 2 years old. Not using a cloth face covering may also at times be appropriate for some individuals who have trouble breathing or need assistance to remove their mask.
- Have adequate supplies to support healthy hygiene behaviors, including soap, hand sanitizer with at least 60 percent alcohol (for staff, adults, and older children who can safely use hand sanitizer), tissues, and no-touch trash cans.
- Consider posting signs on how to stop the spread of COVID-19 and promote everyday protective measures, such as washing hands, covering coughs and sneezes, and properly wearing a face covering.

### **Action: Intensify Cleaning, Disinfection, and Ventilation**

- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces at least daily, as well as shared objects between use.
- Avoid use of items that are not easily cleaned, sanitized, or disinfected.
- Ensure safe and correct application of disinfectants, and keep them away from children.
- Ensure that ventilation systems operate properly, and increase circulation of outdoor air as much as possible by opening windows and doors, using fans, etc. Do not open windows and doors if they pose a safety risk to children using the facility.
- Clean toilets frequently to minimize any fecal-oral transmission.
- Take steps to ensure that all water systems and features (for example, drinking fountains, decorative fountains) are safe to use after a prolonged facility shutdown to minimize the risk of Legionnaires' disease and other diseases associated with water.

### **Action: Promote Physical Distancing**

- Limit the size of gatherings in accordance with the guidance and directives of state and local authorities.
- Consider video streaming or drive-in options for services.
- If appropriate and possible, add additional services to weekly schedules to maintain social distancing at each service, ensuring that clergy, staff, and volunteers at the services can maintain social distancing.
- Consider holding services and gatherings in a large, well-ventilated area or outdoors, as circumstances and faith traditions allow.
- Space out seating for attendees who do not live in the same household to at least six feet apart when possible; consider limiting seating to alternate rows.
- For other gatherings where social distancing is difficult, such as funerals, weddings, religious education classes, youth events, support groups and any other programming, consider whether to hold virtually or limit attendance.

- Avoid or consider suspending use of a choir or musical ensemble during church services or other programming. Consider having a soloist while adhering to physical distancing guidelines between the soloist and attendees. Or consider strictly limiting the number of choir members while keeping at least six feet between individuals. But keep in mind, choirs are a high-risk activity, so follow the latest CDC and scientific guidelines.
- Consider having clergy hold virtual visits (by phone or online) instead of in homes or at the hospital except for certain compassionate care situations, such as end of life.

### **Action: Limit Community Sharing of Ministry and Worship Materials**

- Consider temporarily limiting the sharing of frequently touched objects, such as worship aids, Bibles, prayer books, hymnals, and other bulletins, books, or other items passed or shared among congregants, and encourage congregants to bring their own, if possible, or provide photocopies or project prayers, songs, and texts using electronic means.
- Modify the methods used to receive financial contributions. Consider a stationary collection box, the mail, or electronic methods of collecting regular financial contributions instead of shared collection trays or baskets.
- Avoid or limit close physical contact among church members during rituals (such as approaching the altar to receive communion) as well as mediated contact through frequently touched objects, consistent with your church's traditions and in consultation with local health officials as needed.

### **Action: Plan for When a Staff Member or Congregant Becomes Sick**

- Check for signs and symptoms by encouraging staff or congregants who are sick to stay at home.
- Identify an area to separate anyone who exhibits COVID-like symptoms during hours of operation, and ensure that children are not left without adult supervision.
- Establish procedures for safely transporting anyone who becomes sick at the facility to their home or a healthcare facility.
- Notify local health officials if a person diagnosed with COVID-19 has been in the facility, and communicate with staff and congregants about potential exposure while maintaining confidentiality as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or other applicable laws in accordance with religious practices.
- Inform those with exposure to a person diagnosed with COVID-19 to stay home and self-monitor for symptoms and to follow CDC guidance if symptoms develop. Close off areas used by the sick person, and do not use the area until after it has been cleaned and disinfected; wait 24 hours to clean and disinfect to reduce risk to individuals cleaning. If it is not possible to wait 24 hours, wait as long as possible before cleaning and disinfecting. Ensure safe and correct application of disinfectants, and keep disinfectant products away from children.
- Advise sick staff and congregants not to return to the facility until they have met CDC's criteria to discontinue home isolation.

### Action: Maintain Healthy Operations

- Implement flexible sick leave and related flexible policies and practices for staff (e.g., allow work from home, if feasible).
- Monitor absenteeism and create a roster of trained back-up staff. Designate a staff person to be responsible for responding to COVID-19 concerns. Employees should know who this person is and how to contact them. Communicate clearly with staff and congregants about actions being taken to protect their health.
- Encourage other entities using your facilities to also follow this guidance.
- If the facility offers child care or educational programming for children and youth, follow CDC guidance for such programs.
- Follow the safety actions for all steps in this guide.
- Check your state and local health department’s notices daily about transmission in the community, and adjust operations accordingly. In the event a person diagnosed with COVID-19 is determined to have been in the building and poses a risk to the community, it is strongly suggested to close, then properly clean and disinfect the area and the building where the individual was present.

#### Chapter Actions:

- Approach planning realistically.
- Continue to observe social distancing, protective guidelines, and increased sanitation practices.
- Make a plan for an infection response.
- Keep organizational operations flexible to promote health in staff.
- Use Appendix: Church Reopening Checklist at the end of this manual.

*Prayer: God, please keep our loved ones safe, our neighbors safe, and ourselves safe—and help us to learn and listen to the best ways to do this.*

Portions of this chapter were adapted from the CDC’s “Guidance for Implementing the Opening Up America Again Framework” section on “Interim Guidance for Communities of Faith” (pages 7-9). Retrieved from: <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6883734-CDC-Business-Plans.html>. Please note that the CDC does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness or completeness of information contained on external sites.

## Chapter 5. When to Move On to the Next Step

*“Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?” (1 Kings 3:9).  
When Solomon asked for wisdom, he understood the challenge of leading others and discerning between options. God led Solomon in wisdom and will do the same for you. We recognize the tension and pressure that accompanies all the decisions involved with reopening and pray God leads you in discernment.*

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of using this step-by-step approach is deciding when to move from one step to another—whether to dial up or dial down a church’s activities. As testing increases and we learn more about COVID-19, churches can develop more precise guidance on when to move from one step to another. Because the COVID-19 pandemic will wax and wane, an increase in the reported number of cases and deaths can be used to move back a step if necessary. Though it can sometimes feel like “one step forward, two steps back,” it is important to recognize that recovering from a pandemic rarely occurs in a linear fashion. Following are some factors to consider when thinking about advancing steps in the reopening process.

### Action: Stay Informed

Staying informed by following updates disseminated by local, state, and federal public health agencies is key to putting preparedness into action. Seek out and listen to trusted sources that have been monitoring COVID-19 and issuing updated information, resources, and recommendations. Also be sure to keep informed from week to week about what is known about COVID-19 scientifically from trusted and vetted sources. Though not meant to serve as an exhaustive list, here are a few agencies that you might consider looking to for information (in alphabetical order):

- [Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#)
- [Department of Homeland Security Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives](#)
- [Healthcare Ready](#)
- [Johns Hopkins University CSSSE Interactive Web-Based COVID-19 Dashboard](#)
- [Reopening Your Church](#) (an online resource website from the Humanitarian Disaster Institute and National Association of Evangelicals)
- [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#)
- [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#)

### Action: Consider Member Needs

One of the most important factors to consider is the needs of church members, especially those who require additional support. When a real need exists that is best met or can only be met face-to-face, we should find a way to resume in-person ministries more quickly. Even as we focus on preventing COVID-19 infections, we should not neglect spiritual, emotional, and social needs—in ourselves and others. During this period of social distancing, it is perhaps even more important that churches meet these needs.

### **Responding to Member Needs**

- Train all clergy and staff in safety actions. Consider conducting the training virtually, or, if in-person, ensure that social distancing is maintained.
- Protect staff and congregants who are at higher risk for severe illness by encouraging use of options to participate virtually if possible.
- Care for congregants through continuing spiritual and emotional support and counseling on a flexible or virtual basis, or refer them to other available resources.

### **Action: Invite Others to Speak into the Process**

Partnering reminds us of the importance of working with others. This is a time when collaboration is essential. Let's practice this humbly—knowing our own strengths and weaknesses and then learning from and helping others. Talk with other key and trusted leaders in your church, community, state, and beyond (including associations, networks, and denominations if applicable) to learn how other churches are navigating COVID-19. Together, we step into what God is already doing by:

- Always seeking to partner with God together.
- Using wisdom to discern God's leading.
- Building trust by being transparent, honest, and respectful.
- Recognizing and using the agency of everyone involved.
- Opening our eyes to what God is already doing and inviting us into.

Establish and continue communication with local and state authorities to determine current mitigation levels in your community. Consider partnering with public health, emergency response, government, or nonprofit groups; many groups around the U.S. are offering virtual planning meetings.

### **Action: Monitor Infection Levels**

As churches consider reopening, they must make sure they have the ability to closely monitor the level of infection in their community. If it is going up or is still high, it is not the right time to resume in-person ministries. If the level of infection is going down and is low, then it is safe to move into Step 1. A consistent downward trend in COVID-19 cases and deaths for at least three weeks is one metric to use before considering step 1 of this plan. But a downward trend is not enough; we also must have a low level of infection. This is where it gets tricky because, without extensive testing, we don't know the true number of infections in our communities. Until testing gets ramped up, we can only make a guess based on the number of cases and deaths reported. But this is not ideal and has to be managed very carefully.

## Four Principles for Continuing to Move Forward Faithfully

### 1. We are guided by God through uncertainty.

On the heels of the powerful exodus, God's people endured 40 years of wandering and waiting in the wilderness. Through this, they discovered they could depend on the manna and water God provided. Today, Americans and those around the globe are enduring our own "wilderness" season. As people of faith, we can draw on our conviction and encourage each other in the confidence that we are not alone because we trust in a Provider who is good.

### 2. We are guided by love of neighbor.

Recent news featured protestors challenging the statewide legislated restrictions that they felt limit personal rights and liberties. While they may or may not have valid political justification, the Christian faith simply does not support putting self above others. When asked by an expert in the law to name the greatest commandment, Jesus offered an indivisible twofold response, "Love the Lord your God ... Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39). As churches consider when to reopen our doors, we must let love for our vulnerable neighbors guide us.

### 3. We are guided by the best available science.

In Micah 6:8 we are called to "walk humbly with God," the need for which we may feel even more acutely in vulnerable, uncertain times like we're facing now. This humility should lead us to keep being guided by the best available science that enables us to protect our communities. As we keep learning from people who God has gifted to do rigorous science, we will find the best ways to do ministry and worship together while mitigating health risks.

### 4. We are guided to rejoice and find meaning even in our current trials.

Finally, although all of us are eager to return to "normal," Christians are equipped to find meaning in our current circumstances. Through history, our identity has been shaped when circumstances were not as we would have chosen. Today, followers of Jesus can celebrate and participate in the small acts of kindness and love in a world that feels particularly chaotic. We can call an older adult in isolation or a friend who was just laid off. We can volunteer at a local food bank. We can support local businesses by ordering takeout. As people who have discovered meaning in the person of Jesus, we can live that out even—and perhaps particularly—in these difficult circumstances, as "the joy of the Lord is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10).

### **Chapter Actions:**

- Stay informed on current CDC updates and guidelines.
- Keep updated on changes in the scientific understanding of COVID-19 from week to week from trusted and vetted sources.
- Consider the most vulnerable members when making plans.
- Make decisions in community.
- Monitor infection levels in your community.
- Use Appendix: Church Reopening Checklist at the end of this manual.

*Prayer: God, we can feel overwhelmed by uncertainty and anxiety, but please help us to make wise decisions so we can move forward with peace and attention.*

# Appendix: Church Reopening Checklist

Following is a checklist you can use to help guide the process of reopening your church. Remember that the reopening process is not linear, and you may have to repeat certain steps. This is not an exhaustive list and will need to be adapted to your specific context.

✓	Church Reopening Checklist
<b>Before Making the Decision to Reopen</b>	
	Remember God’s faithfulness and provision.
	Choose a “marathon” mindset, and realize that church members will have different viewpoints on what the right timing is, what risk level is or isn’t acceptable, and how this should be done.
	Embrace humility and recognize our own limitations.
	Commit to staying current on CDC updates, government policies, and COVID-19 development.
	Form a church reopening team.
	Designate two co-coordinators (in case one becomes ill) to help oversee and guide your church’s reopening plans.
	Designate two people on the reopening team to take responsibility for monitoring the latest CDC updates and other recommendations that will be relevant to phases of reopening.
	Communicate with the church about the team, its members, and that decisions will be guided by prayer, the needs of the church community, government restrictions, and scientific public health recommendations.
	Communicate with leadership and then the whole church on your four-stage reopening, including criteria, ways it cares for vulnerable people in your community, and flexibility of plan based on developments.
	After reviewing the best available information, create a list of possible risks, challenges, unknowns, and questions that give you concern or pause about reopening.
	After reviewing the best available information, create a list of possible benefits, opportunities, and information you have surrounding possibly reopening.
	Consider what practices and norms may put church staff, volunteers, members and attendees at risk as well as alternatives that will reduce risk.
	Identify vulnerable and high-risk individuals and groups in your church and community.
	Contact and collaborate with other church leaders in your community to increase the effectiveness of your plan.
	Communicate with local and state authorities to determine current mitigation levels in your community.

<b>Preparing Your Staff and Volunteers for Reopening</b>	
	Develop, update, and/or review your church's emergency plan (including policies on visitor management, visitor exclusion, face mask usage, etc.).
	Regularly remind people that plans may need to change between your meeting and day of anticipated reopening (i.e., you may not be able to reopen on the planned date because of COVID-19 changes).
	Announce and show your support for the members of your church reopening team and leadership (introduce with names and roles).
	Assign team, staff, and volunteer responsibilities to ensure safety guidelines are followed in your facilities.
	Make sure your church staff and volunteers have each other's emergency contact information, especially cell phone numbers.
	A COVID-19 outbreak in your community could lead to staff and volunteer absenteeism, so be sure to prepare alternative staff and volunteer plans to ensure as many of your church's staff and volunteers as possible are available for the reopening.
	Have your church staff and volunteers assisting with reopening your church review and sign off on your church's preparedness plan and COVID-19 policies and agree to follow the procedures.
	Virtually rehearse potential, difficult COVID-19 scenarios with church staff and volunteers (identify possible gaps or challenges, revise as needed).
	Designate staff and volunteers who will be responsible for attending to suspected or known COVID-19 attendees. Ensure they are trained on proper safety protections.
	Create a plan for how your church staff will work with volunteers to report a potential COVID-19 case or exposure to both public health officials and church attendees.
	Have a system in place to track contact between people (to implement if COVID-19 case is found in your community).
	Plan for how your church staff and volunteers will address infractions to safety policies put into place (e.g., not physically distancing, refusing to wear a face mask).
	Encourage your church staff and volunteers to think of reopening your church and navigating COVID-19 as a "marathon" not a "sprint," and help them adopt a long-term mentality and focus.
<b>Preparing Members and Possible Attendees for Reopening</b>	
	Consider member needs that require face-to-face interaction and create a plan to handle these situations safely.
	Inform members and possible attendees how your church will be implementing and following recommended social distancing guidelines.
	Share information about common signs and symptoms of COVID-19 with all church staff, volunteers, and possible attendees (e.g., through email, social media, website postings, posters in your church building).
	Tell others to stay home if they are ill, suspect they are ill, or have come in contact with someone who is ill within the last 14 days.
	Remind others that just because they are not showing symptoms, they could still be carriers of COVID-19 and could spread COVID-19 to others.
	Ask attendees to wear a face mask and take precautions to reduce risk if they choose to attend when your church reopens.

	Give guidance and resources (e.g., extra face masks) to church members on how to recognize and respond to improper use of face masks.
	Provide theological and safety rationale for any significant changes in practices and norms, get buy-in from key leaders and members, and let others know prior to reopening about any possible changes that might be expected.
<b>On Actual Day of Reopening</b>	
	The day before your planned reopening, update church members and possible attendees if your scheduled reopening is going forward as planned or if the reopening needs to be postponed (also communicate any last-minute changes in procedures, practices, and policies that need to be implemented).
	The morning of your planned reopening, update church members and possible attendees if your scheduled reopening is going forward as planned or if the reopening needs to be postponed.
	Meet with your staff and volunteers with plenty of time before you expect possible attendees to begin arriving to prepare together (start with prayer and Scripture).
	Make sure you have your church reopening co-leaders present to ensure your plan is implemented accordingly (and remind others of their leadership).
	Pass out instructions/checklists to staff and volunteers about their responsibilities, general protocols, key information (e.g., each other's cell phone numbers).
	Make any last minute changes in procedures, practices, or policies that may be needed.
	Screen staff and volunteers for fever or respiratory symptoms before they enter your church.
	Schedule some team meetings with staff and volunteers to check in about possible challenges that arise.
	Review your plans with staff and volunteers to make sure everyone is on the same page, make sure plans are still feasible, and address potential gaps that may emerge.
	Share information about common signs and symptoms of COVID-19 with all church staff, volunteers, and attendees at multiple points in the service (e.g., through email, social media, website postings, posters in your church building).
	Have designated staff and volunteers responsible for attending to suspected or known COVID-19 carriers in attendance. Ensure they are trained on the infection prevention and control recommendations for COVID-19 and proper use of personal protective equipment.
	<p>Lovingly turn away members and attendees to return home if they are ill, suspect they are ill, or have come in contact with someone who is ill within the last 14 days.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Assess the person's ability to engage in home monitoring, the ability for safe isolation at home, and the risk of transmission in their home environment.</li> <li>● Caregivers and sick persons should have clear instructions regarding home care and when and how to access the healthcare system for face-to-face care or urgent/emergency conditions.</li> <li>● If possible, identify staff or volunteers who can check in via telephone calls, text, email or other means for those turned away.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage local public health agencies, home health services, and community organizations to assist with support services (such as delivery of food, medication and other goods) for those who may need such support at home.</li> <li>• Identify telehealth services that can provide virtual care to those who are ill and need to be examined by a healthcare provider.</li> </ul>
	Ensure safety supplies are available throughout your church, like tissues, waste receptacles, and alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
	Remind attendees about alternative practices and norms (e.g., changes to how communion is served, offering, greetings).
	Model and communicate the importance of healthy coping approaches during COVID-19.
	Pray for those unable to attend in-person, and encourage attendees to be intentional in reaching out and offering virtual support to others.
	Announce how church leadership will be communicating about tentative possible next steps on reopening your church in the week that is to come, and remind attendees how quickly plans can change because of COVID-19.
	Remind people of God's faithfulness and goodness.
	Show empathy and grace to each other.
	After your service, meet with your church staff and volunteers to pray and reflect on Scripture, thank them for their service, debrief, review the effectiveness of the plan you implemented, revise the plan based on lessons learned, and begin discussing what might be possible reopening next steps (remind staff and volunteers how quickly these plans may need to change and that they should be approached as tentative).

# References

Portions of this manual were adapted from resources in the public domain and our previously published articles in accordance with publisher permissions from the resources below. Passages and many practical recommendations in this guide are directly from [When Your Church Reopens, Here's How to Meet Safely](#) originally published by *Christianity Today* with permission from the author Daniel P. Chin, M.D. and with permission from *Christianity Today*.

Aten, J., & Annan, K. (2020, May 4). Just because the economy is reopening doesn't mean churches should. Religion News Service. <https://religionnews.com/2020/05/04/just-because-the-economy-is-reopening-doesnt-mean-churches-should/>

Aten, J., & Annan, K., (2020). Preparing your church for coronavirus (COVID-19): A step-by-step, research-Informed and faith-based planning manual. Wheaton, IL: Humanitarian Disaster Institute.

CDC (2020, April 12). Communities, schools, workplaces, and events: Guidance for where you live, work, learn, pray, and play (COVID-19). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/index.html>

CDC. (2020, April 12). Interim guidance for administrators and leaders of community- and faith-based organizations to plan, prepare, and respond to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/guidance-community-faith-organizations.html>

CDC. (2020). "Guidance for Implementing the Opening Up America Again Framework" section on "Interim Guidance for Communities of Faith" (pages 7-9). Retrieved from: <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6883734-CDC-Business-Plans.html>

Chin, D. (2020, May 6). When your church reopens, here's how to meet safely. Christianity Today. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/may-web-only/when-churches-reopen-phase-coronavirus-covid-19-guidelines.html>

**Disclaimer:** The Humanitarian Disaster Institute recognizes that sanctioned religious activity varies from state to state. The suggestions provided in this guide are not meant to serve as, nor is to be used as, legal, medical, or healthcare regulations. Rather the information provided in this guide is meant to serve as a framework to help communities of faith consider some suggestions as they determine how they will independently choose to take action. HDI cannot guarantee the accuracy, timeliness, or completeness of information contained in this manual because of how rapidly information is changing regarding what is known about COVID-19. Similarly, HDI cannot guarantee the accuracy, timeliness, or completeness of information contained in this manual regarding protective measures because of how rapidly recommended best practice guidelines are changing. This guide is not meant to replace federal, state, or local guidelines or recommendations on COVID-19.

### About the Humanitarian Disaster Institute

The Humanitarian Disaster Institute was founded in 2011 at Wheaton College and is the country's first faith-based academic disaster research center. Our mission is to help the church prepare and care in a disaster-filled world. HDI carries out our mission through research, training, convening, and resourcing.

### About HDI's M.A. in Humanitarian and Disaster Leadership Program

This M.A. in Humanitarian & Disaster Leadership at Wheaton College Graduate School can be completed in one year on campus or two years online (which includes a week of on-campus coursework at the beginning and end of the program). We have also partnered with the School of Psychology, Counseling, and Family Therapy at Wheaton College Graduate School to offer a new Trauma Certificate in a specialized track specifically tailored to humanitarian and disaster responders. Learn more at [wheaton.edu/HDL](http://wheaton.edu/HDL).

### Contributors

Jamie Aten, Ph.D., is founder and executive director of the Humanitarian Disaster Institute at Wheaton College. He is the author of *A Walking Disaster: What Surviving Katrina and Cancer Taught Me About Faith and Resilience* and *Disaster Ministry Handbook*. Follow on Twitter at [@drjamieaten](https://twitter.com/drjamieaten) or visit [jamieaten.com](http://jamieaten.com).

Kent Annan, M.Div., is director of Humanitarian & Disaster Leadership at Wheaton College. He is author of *Slow Kingdom Coming* and *After Shock: Searching for Honest Faith When Your World Is Shaken*. Follow him on Twitter at [@kentannan](https://twitter.com/kentannan) or visit [kentannan.com](http://kentannan.com).

Nicolette Louissaint, Ph.D., serves as the Executive Director of Healthcare Ready, a nationally-focused nonprofit organization focused on health preparedness and response. Follow on Twitter at [@DrNLouissaint](https://twitter.com/DrNLouissaint) or visit Healthcare Ready's website at [healthcareready.org](http://healthcareready.org).

### Contact Us

Our website and social media accounts provide ongoing updates and resources for preparing your church for COVID-19.

Website: [www.wheaton.edu/hdi](http://www.wheaton.edu/hdi)

Email: [hdi@wheaton.edu](mailto:hdi@wheaton.edu)

Facebook: [facebook.com/WheatonHDI](https://facebook.com/WheatonHDI)

Twitter: [twitter.com/WheatonHDI](https://twitter.com/WheatonHDI)

Instagram: [@wheaton\\_hdi](https://www.instagram.com/wheaton_hdi)

For resources on the topic of this guide, visit [reopeningthechurch.com](http://reopeningthechurch.com).

### Note to Denominational Leaders

If you would like to use this guide widely in your denomination, we're grateful to serve you in that way. If you're interested in adapting it to serve your churches, please email us at [hdi@wheaton.edu](mailto:hdi@wheaton.edu) and we can work quickly with you to add an introduction from your denominational leader, add your logo to the guide, and explore possible inclusion of additional denomination-specific content.

### Citation

Annan, K., Aten, J., & Louissaint, N. (2020). Guide to reopening church services: A step-by-step, Biblically-based approach to resuming in-person ministries. Wheaton, IL: Humanitarian Disaster Institute.

