

10 questions for reopening

Now is the time to develop strategy for health, safety, and ministry

As tempted as we may be to throw open the doors and declare our churches ready for business, pastors and church leaders should take cues from restaurants, doctors' offices, and supermarkets about safe ways to resume operations. Everyone's health is at stake.

Please consider these questions as church leaders meet, to protect the people who frequent your facilities—but also to plan now for effective ministry as the pandemic and its aftereffects linger. Identify a Coronavirus Response Team, including staff, elected leaders, people with medical experience, and good organizers.

Innovative gospel advance depends on insightful planning now, before our churches reopen.

1. How will we strategize for reopening, considering safety and encouraging unity, while allowing for unique concerns?

It might be said we're all in this boat together, but in reality, our vessels are of many sizes and sail on a variety of ponds. Safely navigating this crisis means identifying the common issues surrounding prevention of spreading disease, while recognizing the unique factors, such as location and church size, which will determine the extent and duration of adjustments to ministry.

On top of that, leaders may wish to discuss how to develop congregational support for the measures proposed and the influence of community expectations.

2. How will we practice social distancing in our facilities?

The obvious issues here are space between worship attenders, elimination of seating, and creation of traffic patterns that reduce personal contact in aisles and hallways. The one-way lanes at the grocery stores may serve as a model for discussion.

LifeWay's Ken Braddy has developed a congregational survey that will aid in the development of reopening strategy.

Download it at <https://bit.ly/covidsurvey7>



3. How will we adapt basic church practices that involve communal touching of objects?

It's surprising how many things we touch that others have touched before us. Consider replacement of worship bulletins or paper Sunday school curriculum with electronic versions. The practices in some churches that eliminate passing plates may become more widely practiced, including placement of offering boxes beside the entrances, and disposable pre-packaged bread and juice sets for the Lord's supper. And this may be the time to eliminate the traditional greeting time.

In addition, consider placing hand sanitizer stations throughout the building and propping open doors, so doorknobs need not be touched.

Leaders may ask whether to cancel coffee service, or close the nursery except for family members caring for their own children.

4. How will we limit group sizes, or the number of meetings on site, to reduce risk of disease transmission?

The answer to this question depends on CDC recommendations. If groups are limited to 10, then home meetings may be advisable for many church functions. If groups fewer than 50 are allowed for a while, some churches may need to plan multiple services.

And for churches that are already comfortably full in the auditorium, overflow seating in the fellowship hall or classrooms with video monitors may be needed to guarantee six-foot distancing between worship attenders.

Overall, churches will likely need to ask which meetings are mission critical (such as worship services) and which meetings can be moved or canceled to allow more time for disinfection and unimpeded traffic flow. ▶

5. How will we adapt large summertime activities (such as Vacation Bible School, cookouts, or revivals) for smaller groups?

LifeWay is already publishing adaptations of its VBS curriculum for a variety of settings, from the traditional all-church format to neighborhood meetings, to family small groups at home. This may be the year to revive the Backyard Bible Club, or to adapt the format for a variety of ministries. Before choosing to cancel events, ask whether they can be divided into multiple venues.

Doing this will also require that all events be mission critical and gospel focused. Summer 2020 will not be the year for any ministry activity that does not expressly advance the gospel.

6. How will we limit contact with people at risk while still encouraging gospel ministry?

We want to make guests feel welcome, but we also need to carefully guard the safety of all involved. It will be important to make the new guidelines for behavior in the church facilities public and obvious. Post it everywhere so guests know what to expect.

And we want to continue ministry to at-risk people groups whenever feasible. Leaders will want to ask authorities how to safely engage people in shelters or senior centers. Gospel dissemination will require new methods of delivery.

7. How will we continue or initiate ministry to socially isolated people?

Some of the more heartwarming stories during the pandemic have been about people who reached out to the quarantined—singing from their balconies or delivering groceries. Now that we all know what it feels like to be shut in, the church is better motivated to enhance its ministry to people who are isolated, whether by lack of family nearby, health condition, or fear.

8. How will we build on the technology and ministry lessons we learned by virtual worship and online meetings?

Our April crash course in technology will be handy. If smaller meetings are recommended, then off-site meetings are one alternative. Technology is another. Many churches' Zoom meetings have proven effective, especially for people who are constrained by time or distance. The future will likely include more and briefer online meetings that replace whole evenings spent around a folding table in the median adults' classroom.

9. How will we engage our community in new ways they may be open to for the remainder of 2020?

While our doors have been closed, our communities' needs have been growing. Upon returning, the church will have immediate opportunity to reach out to front line workers and first responders, but also to those who have suffered loss through death or unemployment. People will have physical needs that can be met with groceries or help with errands.

More important, the community will have deep and ongoing spiritual needs. Local churches will be needed in the chaplain role, especially as the pandemic morphs. As rescue operations sometimes turn to recovery of bodies, the COVID-19 rescue will produce a long period of spiritual and emotional recovery.

10. How will we explain our strategy to the church family and the larger community?

Not everyone will understand or agree with the local church's plans for operation after reopening—not church members, not the neighbors. As with the handling of the pandemic itself, everyone has their own ideas about how to resume "normal" life. But the congregation will need a cohesive plan that everyone will live with. Both church members and the surrounding community will need to understand the reasons behind your decisions.

This will require three things from leaders: backbone, diplomacy, and compassion.

Now is not really the time to bend to public opinion or polling. Pastors and church leaders will need to make decisions that are for the safety and health of the flock. A key part of successful implementation of these plans will be careful communication of the strategy and the reasons.

Plan to communicate, both within the church and in the larger community. Plan to overcommunicate. Say it until you're tired of saying it. That's when the listeners are just beginning to understand it.

Finally, may we recommend, steep your strategy process in prayer. Consult the experts. IBSA has plenty of resources online. And beyond our own Church Helps page, there are volumes of resources available from reliable providers and ministry partners. Just as important, the Lord will provide wisdom for those who seek it.

For more information visit
 **[IBSA.org/church-helps](https://www.ibsa.org/church-helps)**