
Questions Church Leadership Should Answer as People Return

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1) What if worship gatherings are still limited and you cannot gather with your complete congregation?

Take for example, a church that had a Pre-COVID-19 average attendance of 350 in worship (two services). Should they be planning on additional services, reducing the service time to 45 minutes with a 30-minute break? One friend in ministry recently said, "My church has about 1000 people in weekly worship services. We can't have 10 worship services that go all weekend long! What will we do?" If we are limited to a smaller number of people, what's the plan at your church to provide a place and time for them to worship together?

2) What adaptations will you make to Communion, Baptisms, and your Worship Ministry?

Do you believe you can conduct communion like you have in the past? Your church's practice may involve passing a plate of elements, or it may occur through intinction. Will you use the self-contained juice and cracker cups? What about baptism – it's going to be impossible to practice physical distancing in a baptism tank. One pastor noted, "What do I do about my worship teams?" He realizes that people standing side-by-side on the stage won't be accepted by all. Large teams on small stages may be perceived as too risky, too quickly.

3) Will you continue offering virtual online worship?

Some churches may think of worship services on Facebook and YouTube Live as a thing of the past, a temporary measure during some really challenging days. Excited to meet together again, virtual services may give way to in-person worship gatherings. But is that the right strategy? Several pastors tell me their worship attendance, prayer meeting attendance, and small group attendance are up – significantly – because people are finding them online. Is it possible that a percentage of your congregation will feel more inclined to continue meeting online rather than in person? This might be linked to convenience or comfort levels around the COVID-19. How do you incorporate both groups of people (virtual and in-person) into one body? Or do you?

4) What is your plan when volunteers do not re-engage?

I'm already hearing that some volunteers are telling their church leaders they aren't coming back to teach until they feel like things are safe enough. They feel it's just too risky for them for various reasons. Will you be able to fully staff your ministries like you did back in February 2020? What happens if your volunteer pool drops by 25-30%? How will you adapt?

5) Will your ushers/greeters do their jobs differently, or at all?

Not have ushers? Really?! We've always had them! Considering our current reality, will everyone want an usher holding the door open while a congregant passes closely by? That's not in line with good physical distancing practices given to us by our Public Health Officer. Maybe ushers should stand back six feet, inside the church building, and welcome people verbally without opening the door for them. You experience that in many retail establishments now. A greeter is there to say hello, but they don't make you pass within a foot of them! Welcome to the new normal COVID-19 has created! Obviously, there are those who will be completely comfortable to return to previous practices, but not everyone.

6) Should you add and/or shorten worship services to allow for social distancing?

I touched on this in #1, but let's drill down a bit more. If physical gatherings are limited in size, you have a few options: (1) offer more services, (2) encourage people to continue worshipping online, (3) remove seating from your worship centre to help people avoid close contact, or (4) block off pews/chairs 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. As your church reopens to in-person worship, you'll have to decide these things.

7) What are you going to do about larger Sunday School groups?

Many will not want to sit in a crowded room for Bible study. Do you feel good about letting 25 or more people meet in a room that holds, well, 25 or 30 adults? If you have space to start new groups, now might be the time. But if your church is out of space, what's the next step? One option is to start another hour of Sunday School. Maybe you go from two hours to three. Yours might go from one hour to two. Or another option is to place some groups online while others remain in-person. There's not going to be a quick and easy solution to this.

8) Do you have a plan for reducing expenses if your church's income doesn't rebound?

This is the time for a "budget audit," while income is still relatively strong, and expenses are lower because of reduced activities. Churches need to be thinking, "What if...?" What if our income doesn't hold steady because of rising unemployment of members and adherents? Or for other reasons? As the church returns to the building, every church needs a "plan B" strategy just in case giving drops in late summer or early fall. I have friends in ministry that I deeply respect who believe we (the church) have not felt the financial impact of COVID-19 like we will in the days and months ahead. I think they may be right.

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

Because your church may have permanently moved online, could this lead to the adoption of a new position of leadership? Will churches require a Virtual Pastor whose job is to oversee the technical 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 and, in fact, is already happening in some churches; 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.

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

One mental health expert said in a webinar meeting last month, "I'm hearing that porn sites are giving away free memberships during COVID-19...just what people don't need." In that same webinar on mental health, the presenter assured the audience that substance abuse is on the rise too. Alcohol sales are soaring. He cautioned us to be ready to do lots of counseling and referring of people to professionals in our post-COVID-19 reality.