

Guidelines for Church Reopening

Queens Federation of Churches

The nature of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be understated. Here, in Queens and New York City, the extreme impact in the number of lives lost and lives disrupted has been catastrophic. Churches, along with every other element of society and social life, have been told to suspend regular operation for the sake of the public health.

As restrictions are being relaxed, in stages, we are exceedingly anxious to resume regular worship services. We are mindful that the nature of Christianity – and indeed, most world religions – is the support derived from congregational affirmation of faith in God. We have been forced to cope with online video worship and other “virtual” gatherings. Interestingly, some congregations have actually reported an increase in online attendance and offerings as compared with pre-shutdown numbers!

In our desire to reopen, we must be guided by a central principle of ministry which is to love one another as we love ourselves. That requires that we take great care to avoid allowing the virus to spread through out ministries. Do no harm! Under the circumstances, you may wish to have a broad consensus of your Board and members before opening.

Some have argued that there is a religious liberty “right” to reopen in contravention of government health regulations. That is a misapplication of our Constitutional protection. We have been insulted by the labeling of many business enterprises as “essential” and, by implication, that religious worship is not essential. That rhetorical slight should not stampede us to act imprudently.

As a matter of Constitutional law, no right is absolute and must yield to, what the Court has termed, a “compelling State interest,” such as health and safety. No one can cry “fire” in a crowded theater with impunity. The comparison of church worship gatherings to limited, short-term shopping in a supermarket is nonsensical. In the former, people gather for a much longer period of time and, through speaking and singing, are more likely to be innocent spreaders of the virus than in very brief encounters at business which involve much less speaking and, likely, no singing which can propel the virus much further into the air. The health-related danger of spreading the virus is much greater in the one than in the other.

Churches have, correctly, been included with other assembly settings such as lectures, concerts, theaters, etc. On May 29, the U.S. Supreme Court denied an application for emergency Injunctive Relief sought by a Pentecostal congregation in Chula Vista, California, making these same points.

Further, if your congregation does begin public worship services in violation of state orders or guidelines, you may be exposing your church to greater liability should a virus spread originate from your services.

When the time comes to begin resuming face-to-face worship, we all should be exceedingly careful to do it in a safe and responsible way. These guidelines are provided with that objective in mind.

It will not be an easy undertaking to reopen your church for worship and other activities. It will take much planning and preparation that will extend for weeks before you are adequately prepared.

We encourage you to form your Protocol Planning/Reopening Team immediately. There is much to think about and much more to do. Throughout you must remember that this is not a time to cut corners, look for loopholes, or avoid necessary precautions. To only perform some of these functions eliminates the effectiveness of any measure taken.

In summary there are critical areas of emphasis that must be cared for in this process:

- Attention to and care for vulnerable individuals.
- Creation and maintenance of social distancing measures.
- Restricting physical contact.
- High levels of sanitation and cleaning.
- Maintenance of a high level of online activity by offering an online worship presence and ZOOM internet meetings.
- Cancellation of certain activities (VBS, mission trips, fellowship meals, fund- raising dinners, nurseries during worship, etc.) for the foreseeable future.

While these guidelines are precautionary by design, please always defer to your local and State Department of Health officials as the Covid-19 shows ongoing signs of mutation.

Worksheet for Protocol Planning and Reopening Teams

What is your inventory of essential supplies?

- Cleaning supplies
- Masks (ample supplies should be available for those who arrive without them)
- Hand sanitizer (with at least 60% alcohol)
- Soap
- Towels
- Toilet Paper
- Cleansing wipes
- Tissues
- No-touch trash cans

Identify clearly named and trained “Cleaning Teams.”

- Develop your cleaning plan and place special emphasis on pews/chairs, doorknobs, railings, bathrooms and other high-touch areas.
- Make arrangements for professional deep cleaning of carpeting and other flooring prior to re-entry.

Determine appropriate and clearly identified paths of entry and exit.

- Calculate how many people your worship space can hold if every other pew is utilized and congregants are sitting in family groups six feet apart from one another. New York State standard is to limit occupancy to 25% of capacity.
- Create a plan for capping attendance when/if the sanctuary/worship space reaches 25 percent of capacity.
- Establish a plan to handle any parishioner who wishes to participate in worship without a mask and those who refuse to wear a mask and people who don't cooperate with social distancing.
- Make sure that ventilation systems operate properly and increase circulation of outdoor air.

Create/purchase signage that explains the following:

- How to stop the spread of Covid-19.
- Everyday protective measures such as hand washing, covering coughs and sneezing, properly wearing a face covering, and social distancing.

Determine how you would handle a variety of specific circumstances by taking the following steps

- Develop a clearly communicated plan for building use agreements to reflect the results of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Contact your local insurance carrier in order gain guidance on how to remain in compliance with their expectations, cautions, and potential restrictions.
- Develop a plan for communicating clearly the restrictions/guidelines to all members of your congregation as well as to those who utilize the building.
- Develop a plan for how you will communicate with the members of the congregation if someone develops Covid-19.
- Consider conducting a survey of the congregation to determine the degree and under what circumstances the members would feel comfortable returning to in-person worship.
- Develop a plan for taking attendance of those present for the purpose of being able to track if someone were to become sick or exposed.
- Work with your leadership team to develop a plan for providing intentional spiritual and emotional care as well as

counseling on a flexible, in person rotation or virtual basis. This would also require that you create a credible listing of print and in-person referrals.

- Enhance your awareness of parishioners and others in your community in need of food, medicine, and mental health support as a result of the pandemic. Also, be aware of the rise of domestic violence in all of our regions.

Determine a plan for collection of the offering, including such things as:

- A stationary collection box
- Mail-in offerings
- Electronic giving. Pay-Pal and Square offer options which have no monthly fees and no contract requirements.

Develop a plan for counting the offering including such things as:

- Gloves
- Disinfectants
- Deposit time frames with consideration of leaving the offering in a box for 2-3 days to reduce the risk of transmission.

Worship Checklist

I. General

- Online worship presence is offered.
- Plans related to these Guidelines have been clearly communicated and signs are posted to assist participants' understanding of healthy practices.
- Care has been taken to identify and communicate with the following:
 - Persons who are feeling sick or have a positive diagnosis with Covid-19 are told to stay home.
 - Those who are in vulnerable age categories, live with vulnerable persons, or have pre-existing medical conditions are encouraged to stay home.
 - Cloth face coverings should not be placed on young children under age 2, anyone who has trouble breathing, or anyone who is unable to remove the mask without assistance (these persons should remain home at this time).
- Attendance must be taken and kept on file so that members can be informed if any attendees develop Covid-19

II. Sanitation/cleaning

- Public spaces have been properly sanitized (especially high-touch places like railings, door handles, pews/chairs, restrooms, etc.)
- Hymnals and Bibles have been removed from pews.
- Carpets/flooring have been deep-cleaned since 3/15/2020.
- Hand sanitizer is made available (at least 60% alcohol).
- Restrooms are fully stocked with soap, toilet paper and hand towels/driers.
 - Only no-touch trash cans are in use.
 - Doors and windows are left open when feasible to encourage air circulation.
 - Restroom signage should encourage hand washing with soap and closing the toilet lid before flushing.

III. Social Distancing/"No-touch" protocols

- Masks are to be worn at all times by everyone present. Church will provide masks to those who do not have them.
- Seating should be restricted to every other pew. Alternative pews should be roped off to ensure social distancing. Families who live in the same household should sit together. This includes youth and children.
- Plans for entry and exit are clearly communicated/marked.
- Capacity has been determined for worship space and plan is in place for how to cap attendance when/if the sanctuary/worship space reaches appropriate social distancing capacity.
- Offering is collected in a no-touch manner (for example, stationary collection box, online giving, text giving, mailed checks).
- Offering is counted and deposited in an appropriate and safe way.
- Passing of the Peace is excluded or conducted in a way that preserves social distancing.
- If Children's moment is to be a part of worship, children should remain with their families and no handouts will be permitted.
- Bulletins and other print materials are not handed out, but available for pick-up, printed in individual homes or placed in seats prior to the event.
- Microphones are not shared.

IV. Suspended activities

- Choir singing/praise bands will not rehearse or be included in the event (soloists and instrumentalists are allowed, as long as social distancing is observed).
- Baptisms will not be conducted at this time.
- Congregational singing will not happen.
- Receiving lines following the service are prohibited.
- No fellowship/social hour, reception or meal will take place on the church property.
- Activities of the Ushers/greeters are suspended.
- Altar calls and the “laying on of hands” are discouraged as they present a challenge to proper social distancing. Alternatives for providing pastoral care “in the moment” will need to be carefully discerned.

V. Holy Communion (if celebrated during this worship service)

- Holy Communion through intinction or with the use of individual cups/bread will not be administered in person until the threat of transmission is minimized. Proximity to those administering and those receiving communion poses an increased risk. Pre-made, self-service communion cups (with bread inside the flap) may be utilized if made available upon entry. This, however, will cause an increased burden on the cleaning of the sanctuary and may not be possible if multiple services are being conducted requiring thorough cleaning in between services. Online Communion will still be permitted until such time as we determine when we can re-assemble with no restrictions.