



# GUIDELINES FOR REOPENING YOUR CHURCH

Churches should develop plans to reopen and operate their ministries according to the [guidance](#) of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), along with state and local guidance that does not violate the First Amendment and other religious freedom protections. What follows are best practices and tips for churches and places of worship to consider when crafting reopening plans.

## ENCOURAGE AT-RISK INDIVIDUALS AND THOSE WITH SYMPTOMS OF ILLNESS TO STAY AT HOME

As you consider reconvening your church gatherings, people in high-risk demographics should be encouraged to not physically attend regular worship services. Vulnerable individuals (the elderly and people with certain underlying medical conditions) should be extra careful. Churches should attend to these congregants and, if possible, make special accommodation for them—such as continuing to live-stream worship services, provide drive-in services, or provide a senior service, exclusively for those 65 and above to attend in person.

## EXERCISE BEST SANITATION PRACTICES

Churches should implement best sanitation practices. Consider implementing the following protocols:

- Take the temperature of people who attend services.
- Require everyone to use hand sanitizer upon entering the building.
- Nurseries and childcare facilities are discouraged as we initially open up. However, if they are utilized they should comply with CDC [guidelines](#) for childcare facilities.
- Disinfect high traffic areas, including restroom facilities between uses.
- Remind members to cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue.
- Encourage members to wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- At first, the use of pew Bibles and hymnals should be discouraged. When they are used they should be regularly sanitized according to best practices.

## MAKE OTHER APPROPRIATE ADJUSTMENTS

In addition to the sanitation practices, churches should consider these guidelines:

- Provide masks for those who attend services, meetings, and Bible studies. Wearing masks could be mandatory or optional, depending on state and local guidance and the discretion of church leadership.
- Do not pass offering plates, but instead collect tithes and offerings in a central collection box (such as a basket placed near the back of the sanctuary). Encourage online giving.
- Consider closing certain common areas where people are more likely to closely interact.
- Do not pass out literature such as church bulletins. If you do pass out material, ensure that ushers are wearing gloves and that any material handed out to parishioners has been sanitized.
- When administering the Lord's Supper, do not pass around a communal bowl. Provide the elements individually. The goal of these practices is to ensure that multiple people do not come into contact with the same surfaces and objects.
- If your church has greeters at the doors, make sure they do not shake hands with members and visitors. Likewise, many churches have a "greeting time" as part of their liturgy. Waving or bumping elbows should take the place of hand shaking for the foreseeable future.
- Adjust seating configurations to allow for increased social distancing. For churches that use individual chairs, consider spacing the chairs out. For churches with pews, consider roping off every other pew. Families could be encouraged to sit together but maintain the recommended distance of six feet between families.
  - Churches may take different approaches to this based on their circumstances and set-up, building size, number of facilities, and their configuration. Some churches may need to have multiple services to enable proper social distancing. Others may be able to spread out over their different facilities. Outdoor services could be a viable option for some churches (a nearby park, field, or parking lot may provide enough space that allows for social distancing).
  - Churches should consider instituting a graduated process of capping attendance. A church might start by allowing a certain level of occupancy and subsequently raise it by a percentage as guidelines allow for further opening up. As the occupancy cap increases, the number of different facilities in use will go down.
- Pastors set the tone for their flock. Consider going out of your way to model recommended behavior. Your calm and cheerful demeanor can encourage congregants to adopt best practices.

## **FOLLOW REASONABLE STATE AND LOCAL GUIDANCE**

So long as restrictions are temporary, applied equally to religious and nonreligious gatherings alike, and there is a good reason for putting them in place, government restrictions are not likely to violate religious freedom protections. However, states and authorities like Nevada and California that are treating religious entities more restrictively than nonreligious entities are likely violating the First Amendment.

Romans 13 instructs Christians to be subject to the governing authorities. The civil authorities have a difficult task ahead, and we should seek to be a part of the solution through cooperation and service to our communities, as we relate to state and local officials responsible for public safety. For example, when public gatherings are initially allowed, some governments may still require social distancing protocols even though other restrictions may be eased. The general easing of one type of restriction, but retaining of others, does not necessarily violate the law.

If, however, there is evidence that government officials are unfairly singling out churches and other religious activities for restriction, it may violate religious freedom protections.

Texas has set a good example of how to encourage the protection of religious freedom during the coronavirus crisis by issuing joint [guidance](#) from the governor and state attorney general. The state has subsequently released [updated guidance](#) containing helpful guidelines for how churches should think about religious freedom while complying with reasonable directives from the government as our country opens up.

Throughout this process, pastors should stay flexible and aware of the approach their state and local governments are taking.

If you encounter a situation in which you believe religious activities are being unfairly singled out, or there is another sort of religious freedom violation, please let us know at [stories@frc.org](mailto:stories@frc.org).

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