

CHURCH REOPENING GUIDANCE

The Recovery Response Task Team of the Church of the Brethren staff strongly recommends that congregations do not open at this time. However, some churches have already begun meeting in person again. Many others are discerning the right time to begin meeting in person again and considering what needs to be done to protect attendees and those whom they associate with after attending an in-person worship service.

As epidemiologist Dr. Kathryn Jacobsen reminded us in a June 2020 Messenger article, “When church leaders are making decisions about when and how to reopen, they need to consider the wellbeing of their congregations and their communities at large . . . We don’t want churches and small groups to become hotspots of infection in their communities. We don’t want church members to become infected at church and carry the virus into nursing homes, factories, shops, and other workplaces.”

Some people can become infected with COVID-19 yet feel normal and not know they can spread the virus. This means someone may come to church not knowing they have the disease and spread it to others who unknowingly may spread it to those in their community.

The following checklist is the result of reviewing a variety of resources. You may need to revise it to meet your state’s requirements. Links to additional resources are listed below the checklist.

May we all continue to seek God’s guidance as we journey through these extraordinary times.

Checklist for Reopening Church Buildings	
Pre-planning Thoughts	
	Allow plenty of time for planning.
	Consider the planning process and the reopening process a marathon, not a sprint.
	Attendees have different viewpoints on when to reopen and how to reopen. Be respectful of these different opinions while working to discern what is best for the congregation and the community.
	Stay current on CDC updates and government policies.
	Keep in mind that church life is inherently different than other parts of life. Church is social and relational including hugging, singing, eating, and caring. Changing these habits may be difficult.
Form a Reopening Team	
	This team will design and implement a reopening plan.
	Determine when it will be right for us to reopen the church building based on: State restrictions Current disease statistics and CDC recommendations Comfort level of attendees and staff (Possibly survey attendees. See “Sample Questions for Survey of Attendees about Reopening” section later in this checklist.)
	Consider issues of liability to the Church and consult with insurance company.

	Consider if any groups using the building require special decisions.
	Consider if the size of gatherings requires special decisions.
	Decide if first gatherings will be outdoors or indoors.
	If outdoors: Meeting outside is safer than meeting indoors. Social distancing still needs to be maintained outside. Bring own lawn chairs or provide chairs with proper cleaning?
	If indoors: Decide which groups will gather: worship, adult groups, children, other.
	Decide what is a “safe distance” in different circumstances. We have been given guidelines of six feet for social distancing, but this is not a magical number. Depending on the wind, humidity, ventilation, type of activity, the safe distance could be 10 feet or even 14 feet.
	Decide if online service will be offered after reopening.
	Decide how we will enforce our rules: e.g. spacing, masks, singing
	Develop a response plan and building closure procedure in case COVID case is discovered.
Prepare Staff and Volunteers for Reopening	
	Develop, update, and/or review your church’s emergency plan. Include policies on visitor management, visitor exclusion, face mask usage, etc.
	Assign staff and volunteer responsibilities to ensure guidelines are followed.
	Rehearse use of guidelines and potential COVID-19 scenarios with staff and volunteers.
	Designate staff and volunteers responsible for attending to suspected/known COVID-19 attendees.
Prior to Reopening the Building (after having been closed for a period of time/months)	
	Communicate to attendees what they can expect upon returning to the church building and what is expected of each person. This includes seating arrangements, use of printed materials, use of masks, entering and exiting – all the items in the “During the Gathering” section of this checklist. In addition, remind those sick to stay home and that it is appropriate for those who are more vulnerable (elderly or those with underlying health conditions) or those who do not yet feel comfortable returning to feel free to stay home and join the worship service online (if available).
	Make sure air conditioners, water heaters and other systems are in working order.
	Check air filters, flush all toilets, turn on all water faucets to confirm operation.
	Check building for water leaks from spring rains.
	Check for unwanted pests that have moved into the building.
	Conduct a complete cleaning and disinfecting of the building.

	Set up several stations with hand-sanitizer (alcohol at least 65%), including at entrance of building.
	Limit or remove furniture in common areas to discourage gathering.
	Tape off or close off all water fountains.
	Restrooms: Prop main door open when possible (to avoid touching handles) if there are individual stalls. Using tape or signs, block off stalls not to be used to allow for social distancing. (Signs could be placed on blocked stalls allowing use in case of necessity.)
	Check parking lot and sidewalks for any new potholes or cracks.
	Close outdoor playgrounds and furnishings Remove or secure non-essential items to reduce chances of touching the surfaces.
During the Gatherings	
	Remind people of God's faithfulness and goodness.
	Show empathy and grace to each other.
	Restricting attendance
	Determine how to manage attendance if the number of attendees will not allow for proper social distancing.
	Ask members to stay home and join via online if they experience any of these symptoms: Fever of 100 degrees or higher Cough or sore throat Shortness of breath Contact within the last two weeks with anyone who has COVID-19
	Social distancing
	<i>In parking lot:</i> Encourage members to park in every other parking space. Consider using a parking attendant.
	<i>Entering building:</i> Control the flow of those entering the building. Consider placing greeters at door to assist in creating space between family units entering and encourage use of hand-sanitizer as entering. Some churches may designate one set of doors for entering, another for exiting. Prop open doors or have someone holding doors open.
	Encourage family units to go directly to pew/chairs to prevent groups gathering inside.
	<i>In the worship area:</i> Block off every other row using tape or rope.
	<i>In the worship area:</i> Ushers can help keep family units sitting at least six feet from each other while maximizing the number of people in the worship service.
	<i>Exiting the worship service:</i> Ushers should dismiss each row, preferably from back to front. Members should go directly out of the building and not gather inside the building.

	Offering: Plan ways to collect the offering without passing the plate: online, box/plate at doorway or other location (with someone to oversee it).
	Communion: Use pre-packaged cups with the juice and the cracker enclosed.
	Greeting: Avoid handshaking, hugs, etc. Practice social distancing.
	Worship team and pastor should be 10 or more feet from attendees.
	Singing: Suspend choirs and congregational singing.
	Face Masks should be required Provide masks for those who do not bring their own Lovingly turn away those unwilling to wear a mask.
	Printed material: Avoid handheld printed material such as hymnals, bulletins, and hand-outs.
	Food and drink: Avoid having food and drink available.
	Keep a record of who attends. This will allow contacting them in the case that an attendee develops COVID-19.
	Other Adult groups: Consider other options for small groups or adult Sunday School to meet (Zoom, Google Hangouts, Facebook Live, Microsoft Teams, etc.)
	Children's Sunday School and ministries: Do not offer onsite children's ministries since social distancing will be difficult. Keeping children socially distanced is harder to do than with adults. Therefore, it is best to delay re-opening children's ministries. Remember that children touch everything and all things (surfaces, toys, pencils, books, etc.). This requires all things and surfaces to be thoroughly cleaned after each use or touch.
Between Gatherings	
	If multiple services are held on Sundays, allow time for cleaning between each service.
	Disinfecting and cleaning can help minimize the spread of a variety of diseases including COVID-19, the seasonal flu, stomach bugs, etc.
	Cleaning high-touch areas is especially important: seats/pews (discard items left in pews), door handles, table/counter tops, electronics, restroom fixture handles, light switches, sinks, toys.
	Replace hand-sanitizer as needed.
Sample Questions for Survey of Attendees about Reopening*	
	Which best describes your current attitude toward returning to worship gatherings? (pick one) a. I will return the first opportunity we have b. I will return soon if I feel that health guidelines are being followed c. Due to health and safety concerns it may be a while until I return

	d. I will not return until there is a cure or vaccine for COVID-19
	<p>What has been the most difficult about not gathering in-person? (select all that apply)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I miss seeing my friends and being with people • I miss hugs or handshakes or other physical contact • I miss volunteering and serving • I miss singing with others • I miss my kids being part of the children’s ministry
	<p>How would you describe you own distancing practices right now for you and your family? (pick one)</p> <p>1 - No distancing. I don’t wear a mask and am living life as normal. 2 - Somewhat distanced. I occasionally wear a mask and wash my hands more often but am almost living life as normal. 3 - Very distanced. I always wear a mask, I limit trips to the grocery, and physically distance myself from others. 4 - Quarantined. Because of health and safety concerns I am vigilant about sanitization and distancing.</p>
	<p>What precautions, if any, do you plan to take when you return to a worship service? (select all that apply)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will wear a face mask • I will stand and sit in places where I will be at least 6 ft from others (beyond my own family) • I will avoid shaking hands • I will avoid crowded hallways • I will bring hand sanitizer • None of these
	<p>What precautions, if any, do you expect our church to take for worship gatherings? (select all that apply)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limit handouts of any kind, like bulletins • Use a new method for communion • Use a new method for collecting tithes and offerings • Encourage social distancing in worship center seating • Prop doors open so people do not have to touch handles • Set up one-way foot traffic entering and exiting the building and sanctuary • Provide hand sanitizer stations • Discourage shaking hands and other physical contact • None of these
	<p>Compliance with health guidelines may change how worship looks and feels. We may need to do things like wear face masks, 6’ of distancing, no handshakes or hugs, and no congregational singing. If precautions like this were in place, how likely would you be to attend a worship service? (pick one)</p> <p>a. I’m ready to come back whatever services look like</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> b. I might not come back until some of the restrictions are lifted c. I might not come back until most or all of the restrictions are lifted
	<p>When we resume children’s Sunday school or activities, what will the comfort level be for you checking your children into their age-appropriate class? (pick one)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. My children will stay with me. b. I'd be just fine checking my children into a clean environment. c. I'd be just fine checking my children in, provided volunteers & children are wearing masks. d. I'd be just fine checking my children in, provided volunteers and children are wearing masks, and we limit the number of children allowed in the classroom at a time.
	<p>When we return to meeting together, what will your comfort level be with volunteering at in-person gatherings? (pick one)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. I'd prefer to not volunteer at this time b. I'd consider volunteering if we wear masks c. I'd consider volunteering if we wear masks, practice physical distancing, and take other sanitary precautions
	<p>Are you or anyone in your home especially at risk for COVID-19 due to age, preexisting condition, or compromised immune system? (pick one)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Yes b. No
	Any other comments or questions.
	*Thanks to Circle of Peace Church in Peoria, AZ for the survey question ideas.

Resources:

[Guidestone - Sample re-entry plan](#)

[Guidestone - As churches begin to reopen, steps to address or consider before you gather](#)

[Before you Gather - Reopening Your Church Services webinar](#)

[10 Steps to Opening Your Church](#)

[8 Questions Your Church Needs to Ask Before Reopening - Sojourners](#)

[Messenger - When should we go back to church](#)

[Guidestone - Road Map to Re-entry](#)

[Guidestone - Sample Infectious Disease Plan](#)

[Church Reopening Checklist - Humanitarian Disaster Institute](#)

[Guide to Reopening Church Services - Humanitarian Disaster Institute](#)