

regathering the church

Coming Out of COVID: Strategy Options



Intention This resource is meant to guide local church possibilities after local authorities have provided opportunity for varying degrees of in-person worship services.

A Phase 2 (Limited Gatherings) Resource

This resource deals with the time between the online only era and the day in-person worship services can be held freely as defined by local authorities. In other words, this is to help should the restoration of regular or pre-COVID worship environments require an incremental process over many months.

Key Words in Regathering

To navigate this season effectively, you will need to hold on to three words: biblical, incremental and safe.

Biblical: As always, churches must strive to maintain a biblical expression of New Testament worship. This season is not an issue of whether or not a local church should meet, but how a church should conduct gatherings in the best interest of public health.

Incremental: Church leaders should commit to the goal of making each weekend worship service the very best it can be, while submitting to the larger scope of wisdom. This helps avoid a rush to unwise gatherings, but at the same time does not leave churches stuck in online-only mode for longer than necessary. Step-by-step and middle ground answers will help churches move toward their ultimate goals better than hard and fast approaches.

Safe: It will be wise to recognize the potential for reduced capacity in all areas of in-person gatherings for the sake of health and life. This area should influence how you execute weekend worship, children's and student ministry and small group-based Bible studies.

How Do We Know We're Doing This Right?

1. Consider local authorities: This is a time to bolster the witness of the local church by considering local governing authorities. If available, consider inviting a local police officer or government official into your planning before publishing any live and corporate worship service plans. If your budget allows, pay for an officer to be on campus during worship gatherings. Be willing to take advice from the officer for proper social distancing.

2. Avoid unilateral decisions: Proverbs mentions over and over the wisdom of multiple counselors. This is a season to do the work of learning what is helpful to your congregation, what unifies the leadership of your church and what encourages your community.

3. Cooperate locally and nationally: Make sure the plans of your church reflect the best practices of your community. If businesses are severely restricted or closed, do not make a plan to have a pre-COVID kind of worship gathering.

What Is The Best Thing We Can Do Before Offering An In-Person Worship Service?

Test drive everything you do before you announce it: This will enable church leaders to gain valuable feedback, learn how people will really respond and iron out best practices by inviting trusted people to experience the worship service. This is also true for small groups. Take this step before offering the service or small group to the congregation or the public. It will help you avoid getting it wrong and suffering from that reputation over the long haul.

Test Drive Check List:

1. Be sure you are legal and on the same page as local and national authorities to resume assembly.
2. Be sure you are following up-to-date social distancing guidelines (CDC Guidelines).
3. Start building your test teams right now. This way you are ready to test run when the local authorities allow.
4. Choose families who are healthy, trustworthy and a represent wide demographic. It is also helpful if they have the talent to help execute the various aspects of corporate worship.
5. Invite 5-10 fewer people than the maximum permitted gathering size, in order to allow for guests and walk-ups to your service.
6. Try to run absolutely everything you are hoping to do. This will give maximum value to your test drive.
7. Communicate your test run plans to the congregation.
8. Health screen all attendees and volunteers. A test drive service is a great chance to see what is helpful and possible. For instance, if assembly group sizes are limited to 50, is it practical to ask all attendees to be screened before entrance?
9. Learn as much as you can from attendees. Give them the opportunity to choose not to do something or to offer a better solution on the spot.
10. Do a follow up Zoom meeting with your test drive group and learn what you need to know from them.

What Is Our Leadership Approach to Regathering?

- 1. Late Adopter:** A decision to wait as long as possible to restore live gatherings. This approach is a better consideration in high-risk COVID-19 areas.
- 2. Incremental Adopter:** A decision to go week by week in decision-making. This approach should be used by the majority of churches. It will cause your plans to feel “right on time” with little to no leadership penalty or reward.
- 3. Early Adopter:** A decision to be among the most aggressive and earliest adopters of various forms of live gathering. This approach is for leaders who are willing to own mistakes and share helpful information with other churches.
- 4. Pioneer:** A decision to attempt various forms of live gathering without data—living on a hunch. This approach is for the church and pastor who are willing to pay the price of finding, testing and implementing best practices. The price could be legal, financial or social in nature (or all of the above).

What Are The Methods of Regathering?

- 1. Drive-in church:** The drive-in church model would be among the safer models of regathering. Learn the pros, cons and best practices of drive-in church.
- 2. Sign-up worship services:** This method will limit the number of live worship services each week or even each month. In other words, the legal COVID-19 service capacity may not hold an entire congregation. So you ask congregants and guests to sign up for one live service per month. Congregants take turns viewing worship online and then coming in person. Obviously, you can scale this to every other week. There has been a recent surge of offering free tickets online for multiple Christmas Eve services to gauge attendance. This type of effort could prove useful. It might be wise to allow for guests by signing fewer people up for each worship service than the maximum allowed.
- 3. Multiple gatherings during the week:** A church divides the number of congregants by the maximum legal gathering number and offers that amount of live worship services. **Example:** 150 regular attendees combined with a season of 50 maximum gathered would mean a church could offer 3-4 live services to fit everyone. Always err on the side of signing up less than capacity to stay legal and allow for guests. At the example size of 50, it would be both logistically practical and wise to add a short health screening form for each family attending.
- 4. Utilize multiple methods:** Most churches should land on this decision. What the church lost in COVID was the ability to gather live and in-person. What the church gained during COVID was a renewed evangelistic emphasis.

Moving forward it is wise to nurture both aspects. This approach also communicates the use of wisdom for at-risk individuals.

- 5. Adult-only services:** This method kills two birds with one stone. It asks parents to alternate worship attendance (naturally diminishing attendance as one parent stays home with children) and holds off on the need to determine kids ministry methods until it becomes clearer.
- 6. Small groups live and corporate worship online:** Small and medium sized churches may decide to dedicate well-prepared and cleaned space for legally appropriate small groups/Bible studies to happen on campus. They continue to livestream or record weekend worship to post online. Consideration could be given to home groups, but leaders would have no way to ensure proper cleanliness.
- 7. Online-only until 100% clear:** Take this approach if you are in a high-risk area, your community is still largely in a lockdown or your local governing authorities have asked you to do so.

How Do We Execute Our Online & Physical Services?

- 1. All live:** Livestream every live gathering you produce. This is a good choice for churches with ample equipment and people resource in the field of technology. In addition, these churches can replay any service they would like any day of the week.
- 2. Livestream & record:** The initial service among multiple services during a week is streamed and then replayed throughout the weekend on a predetermined schedule. This is a good choice for churches that have ample equipment but are limited in people.
- 3. Separate live & streamed services:** Record a worship service during the week (possibly the one you will offer the coming weekend). Your church would then re-stream that service on a predetermined and advertised schedule over the weekend. Live services would be conducted separately and not streamed over the internet.

This option is a good one for churches with limited equipment and where the same person is both producing the content and executing the technology needed for the service.

What Are Best Practices For Health Safety?

- 1. A Positive Attitude:** Determine to have a “get to” approach to regathering, even if it is not perfect. Make sure to speak well of your governing authorities no matter the speed and content of their decisions.
- 2. Appropriate Social Distancing:** If the standard is 6 feet, set your chairs 6 feet apart. Use the common standard until the standard is changed.

3. Screening Volunteers: Make sure to ask your team leaders and volunteers to document their health status before serving. View an example screening form. Always make it clear those who are compromised concerning COVID-19 are better serving the congregation by staying home.

4. Clean & Clean Again: Do whatever it takes to ensure a clean building. It may be wise to hire a cleaning company or provide detailed checklists that must be accomplished before entertaining a gathering of worshippers. Consult those in your local health fields or government recommendations when building your lists.

5. Provide COVID-19 Protection: Offer masks, gloves and hand sanitizing stations both inside and outside of the building. Make sure to deploy cleaning teams while services are in progress, as well as before and after a gathering.

6. When in Doubt, Leave it Out: If it is unclear whether it is wise to offer a certain aspect of worship, simply wait until it is clear.

7. Screening Attendees: Wise leaders will implement the highest levels of health safety. It may or may not be appropriate to screen everyone in your local area, but it should be considered.

8. Encourage Wisdom from At-Risk Groups: One of the challenges of regathering is the certainty that everyone will feel the urge to participate. You will want to champion wise decisions and patience for those who are at-risk and those who might be hesitant to gather for other health reasons.

9. Discourage Personal Contact: For door greeters, go to a smile and wave approach (bonus: get a nice screen print sign with welcome slogans for greeters to hold). It will be wise to discontinue meet and greet times in worship or be creative while maintaining social distancing.

What Are Options for Preschool, Childrens & Student Ministries?

1. Continue online only for preschool, children's and student ministries: Church leadership chooses to limit worship services to gatherings consisting of the entire family inside of the service while ministering to children online during the week. This approach limits concern over young children becoming exposed to COVID-19 and allows parents/guardians full oversight of minors in attendance. This is one of the more preferable options in the early stages of regathering.

2. Limited offerings: Certain contexts may provide for wise use of a preschool ministry during a worship service. This option would seek to allow small groups of preschoolers to attend in-person bible study groups while parents are in corporate worship. The same can take place for children and students age-graded, in-person bible

study while parents attend corporate worship. Or they may simply choose to attend with their parents.

3. Offer ministry corresponding to school

schedules: This is a decision to follow the flow of a local community, following the protocol for what is being executed in the public school system. An advantage here is a church will have access to teachers and school officials to learn best practices. In addition, the community at large will be comfortable and familiar with the decisions made by the church leadership.

4. Offer normal ministries, scaled for social

distancing: We do not recommend this option in the months of April or May. (Future months TBD.) Regular preschool, children's and student ministries are executed incrementally, in approved assembly numbers. This is only an option if it clearly complies with governmental standards and you have prepared for the highest level of health safety.

What About Bible Studies & Discipleship?

1. Groups could be a safe regathering strategy:

This is a good short-term approach to avoid tensions with providing a safe corporate worship experience. On the backside of this method, be sure to include digital groups in your discipleship strategy.

2. Groups can help you keep a pulse on the health

of volunteers: Well-screened groups could provide a better serving pool when the opportunity arises to reopen a campus at any level.

3. Consider group health safety: Groups on campus provide a unified standard of cleanliness as opposed to groups meeting at homes. Meeting on campus allows your church to control the cleanliness and health safety of a meeting space.

4. Continue to embrace digital curriculum: This method of Bible study will likely not go away after COVID-19. Now is the time to research what best fits your church.

How Do We Approach Outreach?

1. Deal with the obvious: Let the issues in your congregation help guide your effort to advance the gospel in your community. Things like jobs, protective gear (masks), financial coaching and food are all good starting places.

2. Connect your online offerings to real world

needs: Make sure to make all the dots connect of your ministry strategy. When you serve the community, be intentional to invite them to an online service.

3. Unleash smaller, screened and well-coached

teams: If and when a decision is made to do local missions, start with trusted volunteers. You can always expand opportunity to others after church leadership has a better handle on what should be done.

4. Be smart as you serve: The church is called to impact the world with the gospel. In this instance, the health of both the congregation and the community could be at stake. Always serve in a way that is seen as smart by the community. Choose outreach projects that meet essential needs and are safe for your volunteers. Serving people via a drive-thru method is wise.

Regather Checklist

1. Check with local municipalities and governing officials on the legality of the church regathering.
2. Develop a response plan for attendees who have contracted COVID-19 after attending a worship service. In addition, develop a plan of response to those who show up with symptoms of sickness.
3. Consider hiring local law enforcement to help implement appropriate standards and maintain social distancing.
4. Professionally and thoroughly clean your entire church campus to CDC standards. Pay attention to varying requirements for various age demographics.
5. Test-drive any assembly with trusted church members before offering to the public.
6. Determine possible traffic patterns where COVID-19 could be easily passed. Develop a plan for high-risk areas.
7. Social distancing: Set your worship centers to comply with current standards and develop an entrance/exit strategy for worship services that meets requirements.
8. Shampoo carpets and thoroughly clean all floors.
9. Sanitize worship seating, door handles, light switches and anything else usually touched by the hand.
10. Bathrooms: Either choose to communicate that bathrooms will be closed, or develop a plan for multiple cleanings per assembly hour.
11. Sanitize worship equipment: pianos, mics, drum sticks, in-ear monitor stations and podiums. Remove hard copy Bibles and all print material from pews/church chairs.
12. Remove nonessential children's ministry items. While children's ministry will be among the last ministries to be implemented, keep the rooms as clean as possible. Consider closing these rooms and any other rooms not in use. Remember, new adult-to-minor ratios could be as low as 1:4 and there may be a requirement for more square footage per person.
13. Implement drive-by giving, place a box in the back or highlight online giving. Avoid passing the plate. Online giving is the safest option.
14. Develop signage asking to abstain from shaking hands and making contact in general.
15. Determine which volunteers must be in gloves and masks. Should all attendees be given gloves and/or masks?
16. Provide multiple hand-sanitizing stations inside and outside of the building.
17. Develop a plan for at-risk people (seniors and medically compromised) who decide to attend a worship service. Consider asking these groups to wait to attend.
18. Communicate cleanliness and health expectations to all attendees. In the communication, reserve the right to deny attendance.
19. Move all printed materials to digital (i.e., worship bulletins).
20. Develop a digital plan for collecting information on guests and spiritual decisions. Spend time developing ways to rethink how the altar call is done, or if it is appropriate to do one at all.

CDC's main COVID-19 Web page: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

State of Texas Department of Health COVID-19 Web page: <https://www.dshs.texas.gov/coronavirus/>

Texas Governor's COVID-19 Web page: <https://gov.texas.gov/coronavirus>

As churches work to maximize their ministries while being good stewards of the health of their membership, the SBTC offers these helps. The information presented by proceeding on this site is relevant only as legal orders limiting gatherings in your area are relaxed or lifted. Each autonomous church should gather their own legal and medical advice since this site is not intended to offer such advice.