

48 Questions to Ask Before You Reopen Your Church

These 48 questions come from two blog posts I wrote on April 18 and 25, 2020. You can find the originals at kenbraddy.com. My goal was to help me think about the reopening of my church and the questions we must ask. After the release of the first post on April 18, readers suggested more questions, and I included them in the second blog post on April 25.

Every church will come to different conclusions about how many of these questions they should address. The goal is to reopen the church “decently and in order.” We must think about how to safeguard the lives of our most vulnerable members.

May these questions help the church to make good decisions as we reopen.

Shoulder to shoulder,

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1. **What if your worship gathering is initially limited to no more than 100 people?** Never happen, you say? Remember that we’ve been limited to gatherings of no more than 10 people in the recent past. Take my church, for example. Pre-COVID 19 we averaged 350 in worship (two services). Should we be planning on adding a third service, reducing the time to 45 minutes with a 15 minute “passing period” so that worshipers can either go to Bible study or go home? One friend in ministry has said, “My church runs 2000 people in worship – we can’t have 20 worship services all weekend long! What will we do?” If we are limited to a smaller number of people by our government leaders, what’s the plan at your church to provide a place and time for them to worship?
2. **What adjustments will you make to the Lord’s Supper, baptisms, and your choir ministry?** Do you believe you can conduct communion like you have in the past? Your church’s tradition may involve passing a plate of elements, or it may include drinking from a common cup in some denominations. 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 pool. And as one reader said, “What do I do about my church’s choir program?” He realizes that people standing side-by-side won’t be practical.
3. **How will you go forward with VBS?** This is a question on people’s minds. There are practical alternatives, and I know many churches that are going to find new times and ways to provide a VBS experience. [Click here to read an article by LifeWay about VBS in the wake of COVID-19.](#)
4. **Is a physical “pass the plate” offering a thing of the past?** How would you feel if you were the 100th person in a worship service to touch the offering plate that 99 other people just touched? Would you be worried about COVID-19 transmission? Sure you would. So how will you take up your weekly offering? Will you install boxes at the doors of the worship center, and perhaps

place some of those in the lobby, so that worshipers can slide their envelopes, cash, or checks into those secured boxes?

5. **What are you doing now to sanitize and sterilize your church building?** Now is the time to wipe down all classrooms (especially those where children meet because of the toys and other items they touch during the course of a Sunday or Wednesday class experience). Have you sprayed pews and chairs with disinfectant? Who is wiping door knobs and handles? Have you had carpet cleaned and disinfected? Now is the time for all this to take place, not the week of the “you can go back to church” announcement by government officials.
6. **Are you going to continue offering children’s church?** As a short-term alternative, family worship be encouraged as *the* primary option in these COVID-19 days? Should parents take their kids to worship, practice physical distancing, and keep a close eye on their little ones?
7. **Are you going to continue hosting special events?** Will your church continue to host weddings? How about funerals? Revivals? You get the idea – there are a number of special events that our churches might host. Which ones will continue, and which ones will be put on hold? And how will you explain which ones continue and which ones don’t?
8. **Are you continuing to provide coffee stations on campus?** Many churches have invested serious dollars in creating a coffee shop experience. My church has a coffee station in the center of our foyer (a self-serve station). Is that a good idea anymore? Tables and chairs may need to be placed in storage so that people don’t congregate within a couple of feet of one another.
9. **Will you continue offering virtual online worship?** Some churches may think of their recent foray into Facebook Live as a means to provide a worship experience for their people a thing of the past – a stop-gap measure during some really strange days. Happy they can meet together again, Facebook Live services may give way to worship experiences on campus. But is that the right strategy? I have heard of church after church whose leaders tell me their worship attendance and group attendance are up – significantly – because people are finding them online. It was reported that one Hispanic church in Las Vegas, Nevada, had 1300 people watch their service online a few weeks ago. Why is that a big deal? They normally average 100 on campus.
10. **What is your plan when volunteers step down?** I’m already hearing that older volunteers are telling their church leaders they aren’t coming back to teach until a vaccine is readily available – it’s just too risky for them because they are most at risk from COVID-19. Will you be able to fully staff your classes like you did back in February?
11. **What’s your strategy to clean and sanitize your church in real time?** It’s one thing to prepare in advance of people’s return to the church building, but how will you keep the place clean and disinfected on a Sunday or Wednesday? Does this give rise to a new team of people on campus whose ministry it is to walk around wiping door knobs and other surfaces? Who is going to clean

restrooms throughout the morning or evening? Remember you'll have hundreds (some of your churches may have thousands) of people touching things while they are on campus.

12. **Do door greeters do their jobs differently, or at all?** Not have door greeters? Seriously?! We've always had door greeters. But in a COVID-19 world, do you really want a door greeter holding the door open while a parishioner walks by within a foot or two of them? That's not in line with good physical distancing practices given to us by the CDC and our state governments. The new normal may be for greeters to stand back six feet, inside the church building, and welcome people verbally without opening the door for them. You experience that at big box stores now. A greeter is there to say hello, but they don't make you pass within a foot of them! Welcome to the new world COVID-19 has created.

13. **Is this the time to suspend or end your church's "meet and greet" time?** Because of physical distancing rules, it probably is – at least temporarily. This practice has been on the decline in recent days, and many churches have already abandoned it because of its ineffectiveness with guests, not because of COVID-19 concerns.

14. **Because people may return very slowly to church, how will you count attendance and effectiveness?** The question has already been raised about should we or should we not take attendance during online worship and online group Bible studies. It's almost a sure thing that worship attendance on campus will not be what it was pre-COVID-19. You need to decide now if you're going to count on-campus only attendance, or merge and add online attendance, too. And how will group leaders take a count in their online groups and go about reporting that?

15. **Should you add and/or shorten worship services to allow for social distancing?** I touched on this in #1 above, but let's drill down a bit. 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 chairs from your worship center to help people avoid close contact (4) block off pews 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. If your church reopens with the "worship only" option, you'll have to decide these things now.

16. **What are you going to do about larger Sunday School groups?** No one is going to want to sit in a crowded room for Bible study, yet so many of our classes have been allowed to grow to have very large attendance. Do you feel good about letting 25 or more senior adults meet in a room that holds, well, 25 or 30 senior adults? If you have space to start new groups, now is the time – help people spread out. But if your church is out of space, like mine is, what's the next step?? One option is to start another hour of Sunday School. For my church, we'd 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 on campus. There's not going to be a quick and easy solution to this.

17. **What's your plan for Sunday School curriculum?** Most churches have provided print products – we call them Personal Study Guides (for group members); some adults still refer to them as "quarterlies" because they are distributed at church at the beginning of a new quarter. But

because of social distancing and the new emphasis on virtual groups, should you keep print products but add digital ones for those groups meeting off campus? Thankfully, my company, LifeWay, creates digital versions of all its ongoing Bible study products, so we can meet whatever demand the church has. I have been providing print products at my church, but I'm about to add digital so my groups can be flexible in meeting on or off campus.

18. **Will you reopen the doors of your church with a “worship only” strategy?** I am hearing of more and more churches that are choosing this option whenever we are allowed to meet again on campus. They are adding services, removing chairs, practicing social distancing, and focusing on regaining momentum in worship. Bible study groups will remain online for safety in the short-term, and will be added back to the on-campus experience in time.

19. **Do you have a plan for reducing expenses if your church’s offerings don’t rebound?** This is the time for a “budget scrub” – while offerings are still decent and expenses have been lower because of reduced activities. Churches need to be thinking, “What if...” – what if our offerings don’t hold steady because of rising unemployment of members? Before 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.

20. **How will you deal with the rise of COVID-19 related addictions?** One mental health expert said in a webinar meeting last week, “I’m hearing that porn sites are giving away free memberships during COVID-19...just what people don’t need.” In that same webinar last week 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.

21. **Are you going to decrease the fellowship time between on-campus worship services?** Some churches that have multiple services and Sunday School hours schedule up to 30 minutes of time between those events because they value the opportunity to gather, have coffee, and fellowship. In a COVID-19 world, it is a good idea *not* to let that happen. Shorter times between worship services, and the elimination of coffee bar areas (yes, I know....it’s sacrilege to think about not having coffee stations around the building!) will help keep people moving to their next destination, a worship service or a Bible study group, and it will help reduce the “let’s hang out and give each other COVID-19.”

22. **Are you going to postpone mid-week Wednesday night services, meals, and Bible studies?** This won’t be a forever thing, but in the near future following the return of the church to its buildings, will you continue a virtual, online prayer meeting and Bible study time? Can you find volunteer workers to support a Wednesday night strategy on campus? Do you want to put people around tables for the traditional mid-week meal on Wednesday nights?

23. **Should you be investing in new digital equipment right now?** Yes, we've all hopped online and used Facebook Live to broadcast our worship services. Some of us are doing that with iPads and other devices, but is this the time to admit that online worship is probably here to stay? If yes, then it makes sense to invest dollars now so that cameras and other equipment can be purchased that will help the church be more professional in the new online world of worship.
24. **Will a new staff or volunteer position emerge from COVID-19?** Because the church has permanently moved online now, could it lead to the adoption of a new position of leadership? Will churches turn their attention to a Virtual Pastor whose job it 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; 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.
25. **What will you do if your church rents or shares its facilities with outside groups or another church?** A question you'll have to answer is, "Will we go forward with the shared space arrangement? If yes, who will be responsible for the deep cleaning after each use? Who will bear the expense and responsibility for this?"
26. **What is our responsibility to churches that meet in schools, theaters, or other rented facilities?** Those groups may not be able to return to their rented facilities for a variety of reasons. Should your church consider seeking out one of those "mobile" churches and offering to house them in your facility until they get back on their feet? It would make for good Kingdom partnerships.
27. **How will you handle decision counseling and the altar call/invitation at the end of your worship service?** Your church may not have this tradition, so it could be a non-issue. In many churches, though, it is possible that individuals and/or families walk to the front of the worship center, talk with the pastor, and announce a decision to follow Christ or ask to officially join the church family. I've placed my hand on people's shoulders, leaned in close to hear them talk, and this won't fit in the new six-foot distancing standards today.
28. **Should you have new plans to meet the financial needs of members, guests, and the community at large?** COVID-19 is going to provide churches with new ways to meet needs in practical ways. Will you need to recruit new people to benevolence ministries? Start a backpack drive for kids going back to school in August? Is it time to begin a food pantry? What about financial counseling to families who are facing financial hardships because of furloughs and layoffs?
29. **Who will enforce physical distancing policies and cleaning practices?** In the back of my mind I can see Barney Fife running around the church blowing a whistle. But if you have new rules, someone is going to have to remind congregants about keeping others safe. Will this be a person or a team of people? Or will you have this at all?

30. **How will you minister to senior members who are concerned about returning?** Many of them do not have internet access. They don't have computers, Apple watches, iPads, or smartphones. If they are slow to return, how can we help them re-engage with their fellow senior members? Would you see any benefit in beginning a special worship service just for them? Local businesses have instituted "senior hours" and open early to these people before the general public is allowed in. Perhaps a new kind of worship service just for them would help seniors be safe, feel safe, and reconnect (at a safe distance!) to their friends whom they may not have seen for months.
31. **Will Bible study groups be encouraged to stay online?** I hope the answer to this is a resounding "yes." Bible study groups can broadcast live via Zoom or Facebook live directly from inside their classrooms. This can reach absent group members, people who are intentionally going to delay returning, and people who are online and looking for a virtual group.
32. **What are you going to do if physical distancing fails and we see a flareup of COVID-19?** It may be a good idea to have a "plan B" should our governors have to reinstitute physical distancing because of a return of COVID-19 as people begin letting their guard down, feeling like the threat has passed. How quickly will you be able to go from on-campus to off-campus only worship and groups?
33. **When the church returns to the building, will people be asked to wear facemasks? Will the church provide them (or can the church provide them)?** States are going to vary in what they require for larger gatherings to take place. One state I heard of is asking that people wear masks. Will you turn away people who don't wear one? Will your church be able to find masks and provide them?
34. **Does your church need to review its insurance policy to make sure your limits of liability can handle potential lawsuits?** Pastors are asking this question in meetings I've attended online. There is a slight concern that a litigious member or guest who contracts COVID-19 might sue the church for allowing people to gather without taking adequate safety precautions.
35. **Have you blocked off pews yet?** In a webinar with leaders from Oklahoma on April 23, I learned their state leaders are requiring every other pew to be closed, and for there to be six feet of distance between people sitting on pews. This will greatly reduce the number of people who can attend a worship service. Will deacons or ushers be "pew police" and move people when they sit too close, or sit on a closed row?
36. **Because airborne droplets travel farther when people sing than when they speak, will worshipers be asked to wear masks to reduce transmission?** This is tied to question 9, but is an important one to consider, especially inside the worship center.

37. **Should pens and hymnals be removed from the backs of worship center pews?** One reader suggested that we do this to reduce contact with hard surfaces so that COVID-19 is not passed that way.
38. **Will the financial strain caused by COVID-19 require some full-time pastors to go part-time or become bi-vocational?** I hope it does not come to this. But if offerings are reduced, how will our churches support the people who lead us? How can we minister to our ministers should their work hours at the church be reduced while they find other work to supplement their income?
39. **How will you continue to provide for the needs of groups like MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers), a weekday preschool ministry, and other non-Sunday gatherings?** Hopefully you will be able to continue facilitating those important meetings, but with physical distancing and safety protocols in place. Will you need additional classrooms? What new procedures do you need to communicate to the participants?
40. **Should you consider installing an air purifier or different kinds of air filters to capture germs?** This was a good question posed by a reader. Upon doing some quick research, there is some merit to this, but it's not *the* answer. It could be part of an overall strategy.
41. **How will you move guests from online experiences (worship/Bible study) and into worship and groups on campus – or will you?** Assimilating people has never been a totally easy process. People can take a long time to commit to a group or regular worship attendance. In our new online world of Bible study and worship, what steps will you take to reach out to people and encourage them to connect on campus. Or is that a thing?
42. **In what other ways will you use Zoom and other online meeting tools now that your church is more acquainted with them?** Have you considered starting or re-starting teacher training using an online tool? It's convenient, saves people's time, and allows you to pivot quickly should you need to do some "instant training" when the need arises.
43. **When adults join an online group, what's the plan to reduce awkwardness and make them feel welcome?** Would you consider having online "greeters" in groups? These would be members of the group who are charged with the responsibility of spotting new people in a Zoom meeting, initiating a private conversation with them through the Chat tool, and then introducing them to the group at large during an appropriate time in the Bible study.
44. **How will your group leaders take attendance in online groups?** Groups still need to record who is present, because those who are not still need to be contacted. Guests need to be included in your group's ministry strategy, and you'll need some basic information about them. How do you capture that now that you won't have a physical card for them to fill out? Will that be done in a follow-up email or phone call?

45. **How might your online group leaders take advantage of a Zoom feature like “Breakout Rooms”?** If you haven’t used that feature yet, you might want to take a look. You can assign people to virtual rooms in which they can respond to a question, or use it to share prayer requests as a subgroup of your larger online group.
46. **What does a virtual invitation look like at the end of a worship service?** How will people respond to the gospel if they are not at the church’s worship service? When we are back in the building, and you have people in the building but others viewing online, how will you give options to the people sitting in their homes who feel drawn by the Holy Spirit to make a response to the gospel or church membership?
47. **What do we do about Mother’s Day, high school graduation/senior recognition, and other special occasions?** There’s no clear option just yet, but you may be able to do something on campus depending upon your state’s schedule for allowing churches to meet. Some churches are holding virtual high school/senior recognition services. Others are pondering how to honor moms on Mother’s Day, but online. These questions really need to be settled very soon.
48. **What is going on?** Besides COVID-19 going on, God is doing great things in His church. That’s what is going on! More people are attending online worship and Bible studies. Mid-week prayer services and Bible studies are being viewed on Facebook Live. The church has learned how to get online within a matter of weeks. New people are hearing the gospel. Folks, it’s not all bad!! God is moving. Let’s move with Him.