



West Virginia Baptist Convention

April 27, 2020

Conversation Guide for Church Leaders Returning to the Church Building

In the beginning we all had this mental image that once this pandemic threat was over, everyone would immediately be able to return with celebration to our normal church routines. However, we are now recognizing that returning to church may look different for a while and may even include the need to return in phases instead of all at once. So as state and governmental leaders begin to announce plans for reopening the country, it seems wise for pastors and church leaders to begin holding conversations and making the necessary preparations for their church facilities, worship services, and ministries. It is important to recognize that safety concerns and protocols may require our worship and ministry to be conducted differently for the foreseeable future.

The purpose of this guide is to provide talking points and questions that may be used by church leadership to assist them in the advance planning and preparation for keeping persons safe when they return to their church worship services and ministry activities. This guide is to be used in conjunction with the most current protocols provided by the Governor, Center for Disease Control (CDC), and the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR). As always, the staff of the West Virginia Baptist Convention are available and eager to assist our WV Baptist family in this process.

Creating a Plan to Return

What the future will look like depends not only on the behavior of the virus, but on the actions of people – as individuals, churches, communities, and governments. Therefore, the way forward will likely be less about following a timetable and more about faithfully discerning the next steps your church will most likely be taking in the future. This is an excellent time to begin to think about the potential challenges and to dream and embrace the potential possibilities.

1. Does your church have a specific plan for reopening your church?
2. The task may be too large for the pastor alone. Are you involving multiple people in formulating such a plan(s)?
3. Does your plan take into account that you might have to return in phases based on the guidelines provided by the Governor, the CDC, and the Health Department?
4. Do you have multiple plans to adjust for changes and updates in social distancing requirements?
5. Does your plan take into consideration the potential availability of the resources that may need to be purchased and stationed throughout the building for use while people gather, i.e. hand sanitizer, disinfectant spray/wipes, masks?
6. Are you able to include medical professionals from your church or the community to help in your decisions?
7. In reopening the church, are you prepared to close again if the situation warrants?
8. Have you considered taking this opportunity to address some of the more challenging and/or difficult issues your church faced before the pandemic?

Communication

In times of change communication is extremely important. This is especially true when you may be asking your members to do things differently when you return. Taking time to develop a plan to communicate effectively and clearly is vital. Remember, you have most likely developed some new communication tools during the stay-at-home period, so do not abandon those new ways of communicating now.

1. Do you have a way to communicate your plan clearly to the congregation prior to reopening?
2. Do you have a way to “enforce” your plan and protocols?
3. How can you communicate to your church and community the steps that you are taking to maintain clean and safe conditions at your church and in your ministries?

Physical and Practical Considerations

Remember how hard it was to stop touching your face when the CDC said it was a major way COVID-19 was spread? Before that you probably were not even aware you touched your face so often. It is the same way in the church. There are numerous practical considerations in maintaining a clean and safe worship environment.

1. Have you considered how social distancing requirements will reduce the seating capacity of your sanctuary? If so, how do you decide who gets to come and who doesn't?
2. Are you prepared to go to multiple services?
3. Have you considered a mix of in-person and online activities as you reopen?
4. How will you handle offering plates, communion, bulletin handouts, greeters/ushers and other things that are passed from one person to another?
5. Have you considered nursery ministry protocols if you have a nursery?
6. Have you considered how you will provide safe and socially distanced children's ministries?
7. Are you prepared to handle the fact that everything might not go "back to normal?"
8. Do you have a strict protocol for disinfecting all areas of the church? For example, greeters wiping down doorknobs or opening doors, bathrooms cleaned and sanitized between services, wiping down pew backs, armrests, handrails, etc.
9. Have you considered the extra costs and personnel needed for disinfecting?
10. Are there any issues with your heating/cooling/ventilation systems that need to be addressed before returning?
11. How are you handling restrooms (i.e. close quarters and sanitation)?
12. How will you handle the returning church members that consistently do not comply with social distancing and other guidelines?

Spiritual and Emotional Considerations

This pandemic may leave the people of your congregation with lingering effects of grief, economic distress, isolation, or other difficulties. Pastors and church leaders should be sensitive to the needs of and be prepared to minister to the people going through these issues.

1. People view the church as a sacred and safe place, what are you doing to make them feel protected and secure?
2. The clear and repeated communication of your safety protocols and sanitization practices will help to remove the anxiety your congregation may feel. Do you have a plan that will allow you to keep them informed and reassured?
3. While people will expect a certain amount of change to take place, they will also be looking for a sense of normalcy and the familiar. How will you balance between the two?
4. Are you equipping people to be prepared to provide the added pastoral care that may be necessary?

5. Are there church members you will encourage to delay returning, due to health and safety reasons, when you reopen? If so how will you handle this communication while considering the potential impact it might have on the individual?
6. How will returning to church affect your preaching/teaching?
7. How will you conduct baptisms, funerals, weddings, and observe the Lord's Supper?
8. In light of the fact that schools are closed, how will that impact how you do youth and children's ministry?

Things to Evaluate

You have experienced and learned a lot during this unprecedented time of ministry including so many positive and creative ways of doing ministry. There will naturally be new ministry challenges and opportunities. Take this time of transitioning to evaluate your church's vision and ministries in light of the changing times we live in.

1. What should you stop doing? What should you begin?
2. What meetings have not been held and not been missed! What needs pruning?
3. What ministries do you prioritize as essential, which do you put on hold temporarily, and which ones just need to be discontinued permanently?
4. What has your deep dive into technology taught you? What good habits has your church embraced these past months that you can immediately integrate, for example, online care through small groups, digital communication, and streaming worship services?
5. Have you considered how you might connect those you have reached through technology into the actual physical community of the church?

We are hopeful that these questions and talking points will prove helpful as you and your leadership prepare to return to worship and ministry in your church building. Above all, please know that the Lord will lead and guide you through these challenging times, and we as the staff of the West Virginia Baptist Convention are praying for you!

Richest Blessings,

The WVBC Staff

Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and he will establish your plans. Proverbs 16:3