

South Atlantic Conference

Reopening Churches in the COVID-19 Environment

As we prepare for our churches to reopen, here are some guidelines to consider and follow where applicable.

Be Informed

Know the risk factors for the virus. For example, those with preexisting conditions and senior citizens are at a higher risk of experiencing worse symptoms than others if they contract the virus.

Anyone with fever, body aches, chills, cough, or otherwise feeling ill needs to stay home and self-isolate from others. Immune compromised people (heart disease, lung disease, kidney disease, diabetes, lupus etc.) should also consider staying at home during the first few weeks of the church opening as this will be an adjustment for everyone. Due to the fear of contracting the virus, those with allergies should be encouraged to continue worshipping from home since the public does not differentiate between “COVID-19 coughing” and “allergy coughing.”

Be in constant communication with your members. Also know that there is no rush to return to the church building. You can continue doing online services or drive-in church if your congregation is still experiencing anxiety and fear.

Prepare Your Church.

1. **Deep clean your entire church** (The conference is providing some financial assistance for cleaning.)- Consider shampooing carpets, sanitizing pews, bathrooms, doorknobs, light switches, and microphones. Always think, “Where will germs be transferred?”
2. Use chemicals and disinfectants as directed and be sure to follow the recommended drying times.
3. Pay attention to the preschool and children’s areas. Consider removing everything nonessential from the room to limit surfaces for potential contamination and do a thorough cleaning in between uses.
4. Temporarily remove Bibles, hymnals, pens, information cards, etc., from the backs of chairs/pews. Pass out offering envelopes and discard any left behind.
5. Post signs about not shaking hands and doing non-contact greetings. Its okay to smile and wave!
6. Consider placing some kind of signs in your facilities to ensure social distancing. Tape, remove chairs, use cones, etc. to indicate the distance needed.
7. **Tell your congregation through flyers on the doors, email, and social media about how you’ve prepared the church for their arrival.** Be sure to use the words “clean, safe, and mindful of health needs and issues in preparation for a non-touch experience” or something similar.

Service Times and Location

1. Keep an online meeting option for those who are afraid or unable to attend your service in person. Many churches have seen a spike in engagement since their online presence has increased.
2. You can offer multiple services to encourage a greater chance of social distancing.

3. Remember that if you have multiple services, you will need to clean between each service. You can shorten the service time to help with the timing of cleaning thoroughly. Some churches are moving to having multiple services during the week to allow for cleaning in between service times.
4. Determine how many volunteers you have available to assist. Limit volunteers to those who do not have preexisting conditions and senior citizens.
5. Church service needs to be streamlined, tight, concise, 60-90 minutes at most in the sanctuary. You may want to give serious consideration for Sabbath School continuing online on Sabbath afternoon.

Worship Services

1. Celebrate the return, but be mindful of needing to grieve depending on your congregation's circumstances. Encourage praise and prayer, and provide messages that spur people to embrace life changes God has revealed to them during the quarantine.
2. Have your church members enter the building and immediately go into the worship service to be seated. If your people are from the same household, they can sit together. Consider spacing out other groups.
3. Everyone must wear a mask (gloves are optional but should be discarded regularly during the course of a day). Members are encouraged to bring a mask from home. If they do not have one, the church should provide one but you should have a mask to enter the sanctuary. A mask needs to cover the nose and mouth and can be reused if put out in the sun for at least 30 minutes.
4. Remember to avoid handing out bulletins, and instead project announcements on screens or have a way for members to download the bulletin. IF bulletins are a must, consider placing them on the pew by gloved ushers, but ask the people to take bulletins home with them. Any papers remaining in the facility when the program is over should be discarded by those assigned using gloves.
5. Change the way you offer communion. Avoid passing a plate or bowl. LifeWay.com offers combined elements of communion that can be picked up as people enter – but make sure that people are not picking from a deep bowl.
6. Avoid passing microphones on the stage and disinfect microphones before changing hands.
7. Strongly consider not using choirs in worship services.
8. Continue offering online giving options. Have stations in the church where people can place their tithe/offerings instead of passing a plate. You may use the "long-handled" offering baskets
6. Consider dismissing in an orderly way to ensure there is social distancing. You may want to use doors just for entering and others just for exiting.

Amenities: Restroom use; Hand Sanitizing; Dinners

1. Restrooms: You must decide whether you will allow bathroom usage at this time. If you don't think you can allow it, then it may not be time to return to the building. If you choose to keep your restrooms open, be sure to post signs about washing hands in bathrooms with appropriate guidelines and have persons assigned to constantly wipe down surfaces that are touched by others. **If you decide to keep your restrooms closed, communicate this to the members BEFORE you open your church.**

2. Display hand sanitizer stations throughout the church. It may be difficult to obtain at this point, so consider if you should meet in person without this element.
3. Supply masks for those without one to increase comfort levels. These may be difficult to obtain, but you could have people make masks as a service to the church.
4. Discontinue any snacks distribution, potlucks, or church dinners until you can determine when it's best to reintroduce these services.

Staff: Greeters and Volunteers

1. Provide security and enlist ushers and greeters to be both inside and outside greeters. Instruct them on how to greet post-quarantine: NO hand shaking or hugs. Also instruct them on how to communicate that the church is a "must-wear-mask" facility.
2. Greeters and Volunteers should be able to answer questions on procedures and policies upon the return to the building. Train them beforehand if possible.
3. Ensure doors are propped open or have the outside greeters to open the door for attendees.
4. If your bathrooms are open, have greeters monitor the bathrooms to ensure hands are washed and social distancing is followed.
5. Consider a temperature check on all staff and volunteers.

Sabbath School and Small Groups

1. Consider whether you will have Sabbath School or small groups. Make sure you're communicating if and when these classes will resume.
2. Consider dividing your groups to maintain the social distancing standards.
3. If you do have class, please know you should clean the doorknobs, water fountains, and other high traffic areas in between uses.
4. If you don't have class, make sure you have provided an outline for your teachers and leaders to continue engagement for your groups. This is still an excellent time to build classes and community.

Preschool and Children

1. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that **children 2 years of age and under do not wear masks or face coverings**. Please keep this in mind as you make decisions.
2. Here is a good rule of thumb: If you wear a mask, it's too soon to have your preschool and children's areas open. Masks may scare the children.
3. Consider not opening any children's programs when you first return. Some churches are choosing to reopen the preschool and children's areas when schools are open.

4. If you have a children's Sabbath School, pre-register children to limit how many are in any room at a time.
5. Limit leaders in the preschool and children's areas to those who do not have pre-existing conditions or senior citizens.
6. Have only one person handle child check in stations and do not pass the check-in device.
7. Do not let parents enter the classroom but instead drop them off at the welcome desk.
8. Have a check list of what's been cleaned and when in each room.
9. Develop a list of procedures for your volunteers. Train them on this list thoroughly, prior to the first meeting.

Choirs, Orchestras, Praise Teams, Bands, etc.

1. Praise Teams: Do not use the full team. Consider rotations. Assign microphones and use the same one every time.
2. Choir: Consider suspending choir practices and choir performances in worship as forceful breathing and exhaling can expel the virus further if someone is infected. Consider using smaller numbers as you reintroduce choirs to the service. Also, space members out appropriately (consider using a diamond pattern with six feet of spacing between members) and dismiss the choir in a way that allows proper distancing.
3. Temporarily suspend using hymnals.
4. Just as healthcare workers change or wash their coats after each use, so should the choir robes be dry cleaned and stored in the bags from the cleaners until you can comfortably reintroduce the choir to the service.
5. Wipe down music stands and instruments after each use.

Tech Teams

1. Clean microphones, headphones, computers, laptops, etc. after every use. Keep a record of when each item was cleaned. DO NOT use water. Rubbing alcohol or alcohol-based cleaners are best.
2. Rotate your tech team if possible. Again, encourage those who feel sick or run down to not come into the service.
3. Keep using the online services.
4. Add in text on screens through projectors if you haven't already. This may be a good opportunity to do so.
5. If you don't have media support for announcements or singing, then print texts and place them in the pews/chairs. Encourage people to take the bulletins/music sheets home with them and not leave them in the pews.