

# Pandemic Plan for the Church

## *Ministering to the Community in a Time of Crisis*

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### **Suggestions to Open the Church during COVID-19 Pandemic**

While the reopening of the Church is a great victory for the Body of Christ, we want to be wise and diligent so not to create a hotspot that can turn into a local outbreak. The risks are higher when meeting indoors for longer periods of time. In addition, other church activities can increase the risk of spread such as talking and singing. Furthermore, many attendees may have comorbidities that put them at higher risk of death. As church leaders, we must prayerfully consider the benefits as well as the hazards to reopening during the pandemic. This document offers items to consider, as well as tips to help when planning to reopen your house of worship. These will help keep your congregation safe in this time.

#### **Things to Consider:**

On May 29<sup>th</sup>, a federal judge approved a restraining order that would allow houses of worship across North Carolina to reopen. This allows indoor meetings at churches to resume.

North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper's spokesperson responded with a statement:

"We don't want indoor meetings to become hot spots for the virus and our health experts continue to warn that large groups sitting together inside for long periods of time are much more likely to cause the spread of COVID-19. While our office disagrees with the decision, we will not appeal, but instead urge houses of worship and their leaders to voluntarily follow public health guidance to keep their members safe."

- **The Church in recent headlines:**

- "Two Southern churches forced to reclose after leaders, congregants get coronavirus" – *The Hill*, 5/19/2020
- "Prayer meeting at evangelical church spawned biggest cluster of COVID-19 in France" - *Daily Sabah*, 3/9/2020
- "At least 70 people infected with coronavirus linked to a single church in California, health officials say" – *CNN*, 4/4/2020
- "Kentucky county 'hit really, really hard' by church revival that spread deadly COVID-19" – *msn*, 4/2/2020
- "Kansas has 3 church-related COVID-19 clusters, state says amid scramble for supplies" – *Wichita Eagle*, 4/6/2020

- “Why are South Koreans Blaming a Church for the Coronavirus” – *NY Times*, 3/9/2020
  - “CDC: Arkansas coronavirus outbreak linked to church services” – *AXIOS*, 3/19/2020
  - “Several members of a Franklin church test positive for COVID-19, health department reports– *WLOS*, 5/24/2020
- **The worst clusters of coronavirus cases around the US are all tied to places where people are in close quarters** for extended periods of time.
  - **Many who attend church have co-morbidities** that put them at higher risk of death from COVID-19. Those being:
    - Asthma
    - Chronic kidney disease
    - Chronic lung disease
    - Diabetes
    - Hemoglobin disorders
    - Immunocompromised (including cancer patients)
    - Liver disease
    - People aged 65 years and older
    - Serious heart conditions
    - Severe obesity
  - **50% of all COVID-19 cases are asymptomatic**, and the people are not aware they have the virus.
  - Although it is easier to spread COVID-19 when symptoms are apparent, **the virus can still be shed by a person infected even without symptoms.**
  - **“Superspreaders”** are those who are infected with the virus, are asymptomatic, and don’t take any measures of inhibiting the spread (face mask, washing hands, etc.).
  - **The incubation period for COVID-19 is about 14 days**, with the median time of 4-5 days from exposure to the onset of symptoms. Most people will develop symptoms with 11 days.
  - **North Carolina is hiring as many as 250 COVID-19 Tracers** to map the spread of the virus. These “Tracers” will do detective work when a person tests positive for the virus. They will identify those who have been in contact with the patient, as well as determine the origin of an outbreak.

- **COVID-19 virus can become aerosolized when a person is talking and singing.** It has been found to float in the air for up to 3 hours in aerosolized form. Spread of the virus can take place when an asymptomatic person is doing either.
- **The virus is 3 times more infectious than the flu.** The  $R_0$  (R “naught”) for Influenza is 1.3, COVID-19 is about 4. This means that a person with COVID-19 will likely infect another 4 people.
- **"There are no safe ways to do things; 'safe' implies something absolute.** Instead, it is all about risk reduction," William Schaffner, Vanderbilt University

## Measures to Consider and Follow when Reopening

With the above topics in mind, a diligent effort should be made to prevent the spread of the disease. Below is a list of special measures that should be taken when reopening the church.

### People in attendance:

- All those who enter the building should be free of any illness or symptom of COVID-19. Symptoms may appear 2-14 days after exposure to the virus. People with these symptoms may have COVID-19:
  - Cough
  - Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
  - Fever
  - Chills
  - Muscle pain
  - Sore throat
  - New loss of taste or smell

This list is not all possible symptoms. Other less common symptoms have been reported, including gastrointestinal symptoms like nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea. basically, anyone who is not feeling well, should not be allowed to enter.

- Consider placing a table outside under an overhang or erecting a tent. At this location have all who plan to attend fill out a health questionnaire in addition to acquiring their temperature.
  - All volunteers should be wearing proper protection
  - Clean thermometers and change out plastic coverings after each use
  - Masks and hand sanitizer should be available
  - Wipe pens after each use
  - A sample questionnaire is attached

## **Preventing the spread of COVID-19:**

- Train greeters to recognize symptoms, as well as post signage
- Limit capacity. It is unlikely all congregants will attend during the pandemic, however, you should limit the capacity to 50%. Other indoor venues such as restaurants are limiting their capacity to as low as 25%.
- All people in the building should be wearing a face covering. This is not for personal protection, but to protect others in the event you are infected.
- Where necessary, put signage up to allow only one-way pedestrian traffic flow to prevent close encounters in hallways and passageways
- Train all employees, deacons, greeters, musicians, choir members, volunteers on:
  - proper hand washing
  - wearing of face masks
  - use of hand sanitizer
  - social distancing
  - properly answer questions
  - cleaning of surfaces
- All staff, musicians, choir members, greeters, etc. should practice good social distancing for protection as well as a good example.
- Train ushers and greeters to kindly approach those in groups to disperse, and to discourage small gatherings.
- Consider using one entrance and one exit:
  - To control the amount of people entering the building
  - To control the proximity of people walking through a narrow doorway
- If possible, leave doors open to prevent the handling of doorknobs.
- Have ushers to ensure social distancing and aid in seating
- Have signage throughout the building
- Anything left behind should be properly disposed of
- Have facial tissues and hand sanitizer available in convenient locations
- The use of water fountains should be prohibited
- Remove Bibles, hymnals, pens etc. from seats.
- No longer hand out bulletins, consider placing them on the seats
- No longer pass a plate for offerings, place drop boxes in convenient places. These must be cleaned frequently.

- No longer pass a plate for Communion elements.
- Prohibit hugging and handshaking
- Prohibit one on one, face to face praying
- Consider removing all non-essential items that could harbor the virus and are difficult to clean, i.e., fake flowers, trees, decorations, etc.
- No longer offer coffee or snacks.

#### **Seating:**

- Keep at least 2 seats empty between parties (6 feet)
  - Consider even 3, 4 or more
- Leave alternate rows empty

#### **Dismissal:**

- When dismissing the congregation, have the ushers lead them out in a formal and orderly way, one row at a time, to prevent any grouping.
- Discourage any groups to congregate in the aisles, hallways, and parking lot.

#### **Child Care:**

Please refer to: the CDC Guidance for Child Care facilities: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/guidance-for-childcare.html>

#### **Cleaning:**

Frequent cleaning isn't only good for cleanliness, it will ensure confidence in those who are attending. Do not have people over 65 years or have co-morbid conditions to clean. Consider engaging volunteers or the youth. Be sure they are properly trained.

- Those cleaning should wear face masks and gloves (eye covering if possible)
- Seats/pews should be wiped down before every service
  - Seats, backs, and arm rests should be frequently wiped down
  - Cushions should be sprayed with disinfectant
- All surfaces that are touched by parishioners should be cleaned frequently with a disinfectant (countertops, doorknobs, light switches, handrails, etc.)
- Musical instruments should be handled by the owner only.
- Microphones, or other equipment should be cleaned after each use
- Audio/visual equipment should be cleaned after each service

- When vacuuming, use a vacuum with a HEPA filter
- When cleaning the carpets, follow the instructions on disinfectant (allow the carpet to stay wet for the necessary time)
- Clean the pulpit after each service
- Ensure the greeting counter is wiped frequently

#### **Bathrooms:**

- It has been determined that COVID-19 is present in the plume of the toilet while flushing. The bathrooms should be cleaned frequently, even during service.
  - All surfaces in the bathroom should be cleaned with a proper disinfectant including:
    - Stalls
    - Walls
    - Toilets
    - Sinks
    - Floors
    - Door handles
  - If surfaces are dirty, clean first with detergent, then use a disinfectant
  - Remove any unnecessary items that might present a surface for the virus to light
  - An easily acquired disinfectant is bleach:
    - 5 tablespoons (1/3 cup) of bleach per gallon is recommended
- Consider having a sanitation station set up with cleaning supplies that is easily accessible to those cleaning. Items to have on hand:
  - Gloves
  - Masks
  - Paper towels
  - Spray bottles
  - Disinfectant
  - Diluted bleach
  - Buckets
  - List of disinfectants approved by the EPA that are in use against COVID -19:  
<https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2>

- Consider assigning the regular cleaning to deacons, the youth, volunteers. Do not allow those over 65 years to participate.
  - Be sure to train them properly in wearing gloves and masks
  - Train them in proper dilution of solutions
  - Train them to properly clean the surfaces
  - Have a schedule or check list available, for “cleaners” to initial to ensure areas have been disinfected.
  - Consider breaking up church building into zones, even color coding areas that might be more exposed and require more frequent cleaning
  - Ensure they know the risks involved, and the possibility of acquiring the virus. If they have a relative that is at risk in the household, they should consider the danger.
  - Haphazard cleaning could increase the chance for a local outbreak.
  - For more information on cleaning surfaces properly please refer to: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/cleaning-disinfection.html>

### **HVAC System:**

There is no filter or building system feature that is proven to remove COVID-19 or any other airborne infectious disease from the air. While new filters won't stop the spread of infectious disease, dirty or ineffective filters can exacerbate underlying respiratory issues that make occupants more vulnerable to COVID-19. Some recommended maintenance procedures:

- Replace air handling unit filters on a regular and consistent basis. If they have not been replaced recently, now is the time to do it.
- Look at increasing the Minimum Efficiency Rating Value (MERV) rating of your filters (a MERV of 12 or more is recommended for viruses). The higher the rating, the more airborne particulates you will capture. However, these filters are more expensive and you will need to change them more often.
- Wipe down the inside of your air handling unit cabinets. When doing this, be careful with cleaning the coils. Using the wrong cleaning products or procedures can damage the coils and/or void your warranty. Consult the unit manufacturer for proper cleaning products and procedures.
- If possible, bring more outside air into the buildings

### **Care for the Workers**

As so many people are required to open the church for service, monitoring the workers is very important. Because they will be more likely exposed to the virus than those attending, being

sure they are not only safe, but remain safe is vital. A before and after briefing might be considered. Consider the following to be covered:

- Prayer
- Stress the necessity of hand washing, and require face coverings
- Assign special duties to be performed during the crisis
- Train them in the proper cleaning as well as the frequency of common surfaces.
- Monitor to be sure no one is showing any symptoms, if so, they must go home.
- Remember they may be experiencing some stress
  - Ask questions as to how things are going
  - Give opportunities for people to share anything special that took place during the service
  - Ask if they have any recommendations
  - Treat it like a debriefing
  - Follow-up throughout the week to ensure no one is experiencing any illness that may have been acquired at service