

## The Least of These: Guidelines for Churches in a Pandemic

### Preamble

This guidance is meant to help provide some clarity in decision making for churches. While there was significant unity in decisions to limit the spread of COVID-19 and “flatten the curve,” the process of reopening will be far more fraught. These guidelines are given as best practices for each Session to consider.

### Guideline #1: Cultural Goals and Christian Goals Must Be Considered Wisely

*Scripture:* “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2)

*Recommendations:* Since there will be an inevitable diversity in approaches to reopening, it is unreasonable to presume a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Many sectors are driven – rightly so – by economic ends. The church is driven – faithfully so – by different ends. Thus, we recommend:

- At the bare minimum, wait an additional three Sundays from the time that businesses re-open until your church considers re-opening. This additional time will allow you to see if there is a spike or increase in COVID cases as a result of increased social activity.
- Additionally, keep in mind that it will likely be members of your church who are participating in this increased social activity (e.g. eating out, shopping more freely, etc.) and they will, therefore, be potentially more at risk for contracting and spreading the virus.

### Guideline #2: Make Plans with your *Most Vulnerable* Congregants and Community Members in Mind

*Scripture:* “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40)

*Recommendations:* The greatest contrast between the church and the rest of society is the church’s explicit goal of seeking and serving “the least of these.” The church defines itself in part by its emphasis as the beloved community, which at times stands apart from a largely individualist Western culture. We will hear guidance – and have already begun to hear it – that sounds something like, “If someone doesn’t feel safe going out, they should choose not to.” The result of such guidance is that the world will belong to the young and healthy, while the older and immunocompromised will be excluded. This clearly goes against our deepest held values as the church. As a result, decisions we make must be predicated with “the least of these” in mind, first and foremost. Therefore, we recommend: Avoiding a rush back to large group, in-person activities (see: Guideline #1).

- Permitting staff – without prejudice – to continue to work from home if they self-define as “at risk” or otherwise immunocompromised (Note: HIPAA – and general decency – prohibits employers from asking for specific medical diagnoses, hence the church should just abide by each employee’s self-designation and work out the details of their employment from there).
- Wearing facemasks during any large group event, including worship.
- Shuttering any food-and-drink-centered church activities until there is a vaccine and a majority of people have received it.

- Avoiding groups of more than 50, even if this means having to offer additional worship services and/or find creative ways to spread throughout the entirety of the church building (e.g. simulcasting worship from the sanctuary into a fellowship hall) so that 6-foot social distancing can be enforced at all times.
- Seriously considering whether certain church spaces – like a choir loft – can be utilized while still socially distancing and, if not, suspending the activities in those spaces – like having a choir – until there is a vaccine and a majority of people have received it.
- Taking the temperature of people when they come to church for any activity, and sending home anyone with even a low-grade fever (99.5 degrees or above).
- Having Sessions pass every idea or recommendation through the “least of these” filter and collectively omitting any activities where some folks would be necessarily excluded
- Asserting and reasserting your church’s commitment to the most vulnerable through every form of messaging – newsletters, emails, sermons, etc.
- Having the courage to routinely and consistently do all of these activities for the foreseeable future.

### **Guideline #3: Don’t Forget About Evangelism and Community Outreach**

*Scripture:* “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’” (Matthew 28:18-20)

*Recommendations:* It is easy to think about the congregation you have, and forget about the people God might be calling to your church. Times of existential crisis are often, also, times of spiritual renewal. Do not forget about the community that surrounds your church/congregation.

- Maintain enough space in any activity for guests or visitors to participate without skewing numbers of social distancing into an unhealthy place.
- Prepare to articulate, gently and kindly, why you are utilizing certain practices (e.g. taking temperatures, wearing facemasks); this will be the first way you introduce guests to the character of our God, who looks out for and even identifies with “the least of these.”
- Seek contact information for any visitors, especially email addresses, so they can be included in your congregation’s online programs (see: Guideline #5 below); encourage them to seek out whatever social media your church is using in the same way they sought out the physical church.
- Follow up with visitors through electronic/online means.

### **Guideline #4: Start Small and Build Bigger**

*Scripture:* “You have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” (Matthew 25:21)

*Recommendations:* It’s easy to become myopically focused on just returning to large group, in-person worship. However, we recommend building to this event rather than starting with it. The following recommendations should be undertaken sequentially, allowing for a few weeks between each increase in activity. In each recommendation there is an assumption that good hygiene and social distancing is still taking place.

- Return employees to the church. Discourage congregants from “popping in” by making it clear that the church is open only as an office/employment space.
- Open the church to visitors during business hours.
- Resume Session/committee meetings.
- Resume youth group/small groups/Bible study meetings.
- Finally, hold worship services, but be prepared to enact the recommendations in Guidelines #2 when you do so.

### **Guideline #5: Extend, and Even Enhance, Your Current Digital Practices Even After You Return to In-Person Activities**

*Scripture:* “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19)

*Recommendations:* The suddenness of the spread of COVID-19 resulted in most churches rapidly developing their best online practices. It was a couple weeks of flurried and frenzied activity as new skills were cultivated. At the time, we might have assumed these practices were mere stop gap measures, but if the above guidance is followed, it is clear that they will now be part of the fabric of congregational life. So...

- Continue to stream/record worship services so congregants who want or must stay home are able to remain engaged and growing in their discipleship.
- Start/Continue to offer online Bible study/prayer groups/etc.
- Keep online giving portals open and active; additionally, encourage people to utilize them, if they are unable to attend in-person activities.
- Create original, online-only content/forms of engagement so that your congregation knows that real relationships – and not just recordings of actual relationships – happen in these places too.

### **Postlude**

In all things, churches are encouraged to avoid fear-based decisions. Even more important than trying to confront fear of COVID-19 (because the line between “fear” and “caution” is very thin indeed) is the confrontation of other, more perennial fears – e.g. “Giving is down,” “So-and-so is angry that we’re not doing this-or-that,” etc. Because we are habit-forming creatures, we are more susceptible to fears we’ve succumbed to in the past than we are novel fears around a novel coronavirus. Resist fear. Have faith that your church will rise to new challenges, grow new capacities to do this, and will experience new faith and life in Christ as a result.