



The Senior Pastor's Guide to Reopening



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Introduction

When we all realized COVID-19 was going to impact church services, we responded quickly.

In a matter of days, we made tough decisions, moved services online, figured out a new technology suite, stopped doing some things, and started doing other things. Phase one was all about response.

Now, we're looking to reopen. That's phase two.

If there was just one piece of advice you hear in this entire guide, I hope it's this: Gather a few wise and trustworthy people and make decisions together.

You don't have to decide alone. In fact, I think the answer to most tough questions should be, "You know...I don't really know the answer to that, but let's get a few wise people together, talk about it, make a clear decision, and then commit to it."

My friend Eric Geiger said this...

"A wise leader will bring a first draft or a framework to kick start the conversation but make plans and decisions in community."

As you talk through when to reopen, how to reopen, and what changes you need to continually make, don't do it alone.

Articles, webinars, checklists, and other leaders will help you.

We have coaches and resources that will help you.

This very guide will help you.

But a close, trusted community of leaders who love you, Jesus, and the church will be one of your greatest sources of help during this time.



Michael Lukaszewski
Founder and CEO of Church Fuel





You don't have to decide alone.

1

When to Reopen

In the following pages, you'll see a list of questions you should ask, best practices to consider, and ideas to explore.

But one thing you won't find is a recommended date to reopen.

That's because you need to wrestle with the factors at hand and make the decision.

Your city, your state, your local community, your leaders, your congregation...your decision.

Be a good steward of all the resources available to you, from recommended national guidelines to local leadership to your community of prayerful leaders.

But every church will be different.

To help you determine that date, here are ten questions you should consider.

1. Do we have a compelling reason to return to gathering instead of what we are doing now?
2. What do my state officials and local authorities recommend right now?
3. How do the people in my church feel about gathering publicly?
4. How do the people in my community feel about gathering publicly right now?
5. Do we have a real sense of how volunteers will participate?
6. Do we have a real sense of how parents and children will participate?
7. What must stay the same when we reopen?
8. What must change for us to reopen?
9. Do we have a communications or PR plan in place?
10. What is the wise thing to do?

Based on all of these questions, the date we plan to reopen is _____.



2

How to Reopen

A lot of factors will go into your decision about when to reopen. But once that decision is made, it's likely the hard work is just beginning.

Let's turn our attention to how to reopen with three big principles.

#1 – TAKE GUIDANCE FROM YOUR LOCAL OFFICIALS.

The White House released a set of [guidelines for reopening America](#). Each state is different, but most are following this general phased approach.

Here's how one church is preparing each to move through the phases.

Phase 1 (RESTRICTED) Operations

Phase 1 operations have the most strict requirements due to concern of spread of the virus, where we have the most responsibility of doing our part to keep social distancing and isolation of staff. No gathering of staff or congregation is authorized with the exception of production of streaming church services and recording of special communications to the congregation. Only facilities personnel and excepted staff may be on campus without consent of the Executive Pastor of Operations.

During this phase, the following will be in place:

- Church Services ONLINE ONLY (FB / Church Online)

COVID-19 Recovery Plan



	PHASE 1 Restricted Operations	PHASE 2 Reduced Operations	PHASE 3 Limited Operations	PHASE 4* Steady-State Operations
Services	ONLINE/FB	ONLINE/FB	IN PERSON**	IN PERSON
Journey Groups	ONLINE/ZOOM	ONLINE/ZOOM	IN PERSON	IN PERSON
WE Campus	CLOSED	CLOSED	OPEN	OPEN
Counseling	ONLINE/ZOOM	ONLINE/ZOOM	IN PERSON	IN PERSON
Events	CANCELLED	CANCELLED	CASE-BY-CASE	ALLOWED
Staff Location	REMOTE	CRITICAL ONLY	ON-SITE	ON-SITE
Vulnerable	ONLINE ONLY	ONLINE ONLY	ONLINE ONLY	IN PERSON

- Small Groups ONLINE ONLY (Zoom)
- Campus CLOSED
- Counseling ONLINE ONLY (Zoom / Phone)
- Special Events CANCELLED
- Staff Location 100% REMOTE
- Vulnerable ONLINE ONLY

Phase 2 (REDUCED) Operations

Achieving Phase 2 Operations allows for the lightening of restrictions towards gatherings and will allow for small groups of people to gather together. This is the milestone that will allow for Small Groups to continue meeting in person; it is expected that no more than 50 people can congregate in this phase, with limitations adjusted as we near Phase 3.

During this phase, the following will be in place:

- Church Services ONLINE ONLY (FB / Church Online)
- Small Groups ONLINE / IN PERSON
- Campus CLOSED
- Counseling ONLINE ONLY (Zoom / Phone)
- Special Events CANCELLED
- Staff Location 100% REMOTE
- Vulnerable ONLINE ONLY

Phase 3 (LIMITED) Operations

Achieving Phase 3 Operations allows for the gathering of larger groups of people, and the local government has yet to provide the number restrictions. It is expected that groups of 20,30,50,100 will be able to gather over time, and church leadership will determine which activities will be allowed during each of those representative gathering levels, ensuring safety and security of those who gather.

Phase 3A: Limited to gatherings of 500

During this phase, the following will be in place:

- Church Services IN PERSON (500 Max)
- Small Groups IN PERSON
- Campus OPEN
- Counseling IN PERSON
- Special Events CANCELLED
- Staff Location CRITICAL STAFF ON-SITE
- Vulnerable ONLINE ONLY



You could also compare your children's ministry environment to an elementary school or a daycare center. What are their policies? How are they coming back online?

#2 – SURVEY YOUR CONGREGATION.

The second thing you want to do as you consider how to reopen is to get real information and data from your congregation. It's great to trust the Spirit or follow your intuition, but adding facts and data to your decision-making process is the smart thing to do. Every pastor should know the numbers.

It's not about being data-driven, it's about being data-informed. It's knowing the condition of your flocks. It's being a good steward of the information available to you. To borrow from a story Jesus told, it's considering the cost before starting construction.

If you've ever been on the receiving end of "Hey, pastor...people are saying..." you know what I'm talking about. "People are saying" is an emotional statement. When you hear it, you should push back.

- What people?
- How many people?
- What are their names?

That's pushing for real information to help you make decisions.

As you consider when and how to reopen, it's smart to get real information from your people. Not anecdotal stories or one voice magnified by a factor of ten. You need to get real input.

A great way to do this is to run a congregational survey.

It doesn't have to be a long, complicated, or overly

technical survey. In fact, you could just ask a few questions. Here are five questions I recommend you ask right now.

- When is the soonest you would consider coming back to the church building?
- What would you want to see happen before you would comfortably return to church?
- If we opened next week, would you volunteer in your same spot?
- If we opened next week, would you send your children to our children's programming?
- What do you miss most about church?

You can use tools like [Typeform](#), [Survey Monkey](#), or [Google Forms](#) to set up your survey. You could take it to the next level and use a tool like [Gloo](#) to run periodic congregational check-ins. It's a fantastic tool to help you get the pulse of your people.

#3 – PUT TOGETHER A REOPENING TASK FORCE.

As you look to reopen, I highly recommend that you put together a small group of people to help make decisions and, just as importantly, to implement them.

A short-term task force made up of people who love the church and want to make the best decisions can be a tremendous help during this time. Not only will your congregation at large have a higher sense of trust knowing there's a group of people making important decisions, but you'll also think through things you would never consider on your own.

As you put together a team, make sure it's representative of your church, community, and various viewpoints. Have someone there who thinks through the lens of children and families. Have someone gifted in communications or marketing. Strike a balance between risk-takers and guardians.



#4 – DETERMINE NEW STAFF AND VOLUNTEER ROLES.

After your task force’s duties have wrapped up and your church has decided to reopen the building for in-person services, you might notice a need for staff and volunteer roles that didn’t exist before.

This could also be a time when you need to repurpose some people. For example, if your staff or volunteer team member was normally in charge of serving coffee, kids ministry on Sunday, or something else that the church isn’t doing right now for safety reasons, this is an opportunity to find other areas for this person to serve.

A few examples of new staff or volunteer roles you might need to help with reopening:

- A health crew supervisor to ensure that the safety plan and policies are followed
- Volunteers to sanitize high-touch surfaces during service (or between services if you have multiple)
- An online campus director to oversee the church’s online strategy and help people get connected online
- Volunteers to help with check-in and seating if pre-registration is required
- Online chat moderators to pray with and engage people who continue to watch online

As you reopen the building, you may even find yourself rebuilding entire teams and not just roles. Some people who volunteered pre-pandemic might not feel safe coming back yet. They may struggle with consistency and rebuilding routines.

But this new season is a time to determine which roles are needed after all. Which new roles or teams should you add and which ones don’t need to return right now (or at all)? [Check out these new serving opportunities created by the pandemic](#) that Lebanon Christian Church posted on their website.

3

Communication

One of the chief concerns among churches considering reopening for in-person services is public perception.

And while the care and safety of your congregation is the top priority, no one wants to be labeled as “reckless” by the community. Potentially negative medical outcomes, protests, lawsuits, threats, and more can cast a dark cloud over the other good work that a church has done for their congregation and community during this time.

But when your church does decide to reopen, especially if you’re among the first, you’ll want to be prepared to answer questions that people will have and handle the media when they reach out.

- Create and release a press release to your congregation and to local media that outlines how your church reached the decision to reopen in an informed, prayerful way and the steps you’ll take to do so safely.

- Publish a page on your church’s website that features the details of your reopening plan and your answers to frequently asked questions. [Here’s a great example from First Colleyville in Texas](#) and [another from Long Hollow Baptist Church in Tennessee](#).
- Use a combination of social media, email, and your website to communicate the changes with those who will attend in-person and those who will continue to watch online.

[A pastor in Florida did a sit-down interview with the local news and calmly explained his church’s plan](#). If you decide to speak to the media about your church’s decision to reopen, choose a designated spokesperson in advance, and be prepared to answer questions such as:

- What kind of approach is the church taking (opening in phases, decreasing capacity, sanitation standards, etc.)?
- How did the church leaders come to the decision to reopen at this time?



- What changes are you anticipating to the way the church operates and the ways people are able to participate?
- What response would you give to those who believe it's too soon to reopen the church doors?

To get reopening information out to the people who attend your church, you have a variety of effective options. Communicating with clarity and concern is the most important objective, so using more than one method is the way to go.

With news of businesses and restaurants reopening in some parts of the United States, people in your congregation need to hear from you—even if your church has decided not to reopen yet.

EMAIL

In addition to sending an email to your church about

whether or not you've decided to reopen soon, some churches have included the people in their church in the decision-making process.

Damascus Community Church published [an update message](#) that included a survey to capture people's input as they develop a plan to reopen. Hamilton Mill United Methodist Church sent [this email](#) to their church on their approach to reopening. Immanuel Baptist Church included a graphic that explains their tentative plan for reopening in [this email](#).

A few points to consider including in your email communication:

- "We haven't set a reopening date yet" or "Our date to reopen for in-person services is..."
- Encouragement and options for high-risk individuals
- A link to a PDF or website page with details (like this [clear, phased reopening plan from Campus Church](#))



Communicating with clarity and concern is the most important objective.

- Criteria that church leadership is using to make the decision to reopen
- Extra precautions the church is taking to keep people safe
- Dates, times, and changes for in-person services
- Who to contact to ask additional questions or to address the local media

WEBSITE

Update your church's website with your reopening message, plan, and guidelines and encourage people to check one dedicated page for updates.

- The Source Church's [COVID-19 updates page](#) includes their decision to reopen, a list of safety precautions, and dates that other small groups will relaunch.
- Kearney eFree Church published [an update on their news page](#) with their reopening strategy, dates, and requirements they'll implement for safety.
- Corryton Church [released a statement](#) through their website that outlines their strategy and guidelines to attend a reopening service on May 3.
- Springhill Presbyterian Church [posted a short update](#) on their website that links to PDF documents detailing their reopening phase-in plan and phase-in FAQ sheet.
- Bannockburn Church created a dedicated "[church is back](#)" page listing reopening phases and service changes.

VIDEO

Communicating through video is another great option that can be executed among multiple platforms—sent in an email newsletter, posted on the church website, on social media, etc.

- Roswell Street Baptist Church [posted a video on](#)

[their Facebook page](#) detailing their plan to reopen on May 10 and showing adjustments made in the church building for social distancing.

- Andy Stanley has posted [short, punchy, humorous videos on social media](#) about Northpoint Church's decision not to reopen yet.
- South Tulsa Baptist Church [published a video on their coronavirus updates page](#) that gives an overview of their reopening process.

SOCIAL MEDIA

With online worship and communication being the new normal for a while, many people look to a church's social media channels for updates. Social media is a great platform to share quick points about your church's reopening plan and link to where people can find more details.

- Transformation Church [announced on Instagram](#) that their services will remain online-only through the month of May.
- Woodlake Church posted [their announcement](#) of returning to live services on Twitter and linked to a website page with more information.
- Grace Church Wichita Falls published [a video](#) on Facebook explaining their plan to reopen gradually and linked to a PDF document with more details.





Photo: churchink.com

SIGNAGE

Changes to the church building will be the most visible differences when you reopen. Most people won't know what to do, where to sit, or where to get supplies, so signage is key in keeping people informed and ultimately, safer.

A few signs to consider ordering, depending on your building layout and the specific precautions your church is taking, are:

- 6-feet distance markers
- "Please maintain 6-feet of space"
- "Please sit one row apart"
- Maximum people allowed in a room or space (elevator, hallway, etc.)
- "Please wait here"
- "Please wear a facemask before entering the lobby"
- "Do not enter" for restricted areas

CLEAR AND CREATIVE REOPENING COMMUNICATION

The key is to strike a balance between transparency (what and how much to share) and clarity (how to say it). Here's what we recommend and what we noticed about the best examples of reopening communication from churches.

- **Tell people the "dos and don'ts"** of coming back to church, as Grace Chapel Community Church did in [this light-hearted video](#). Remember that no one knows what to do and it's your responsibility to help them prepare.
- **Highlight what's different.** Everyone wants to get back to normal, so let people know in advance what changes to expect (which areas will be closed, what's different about parking, the lobby, the sanctuary, etc.). Covenant Love Church did a [building walkthrough video](#) before reopening to show what's new.
- **Communicate what's required.** If your church is requiring masks, temperature checks, pre-registration, etc., state this clearly. Try not to use words such as "recommended" unless you don't plan to enforce the policy.
- **Break the most important points down into simple sentences.** Living Word Church did a great job with this on their [colorful, attention-grabbing flyer](#).
- **Gather up some questions people are asking** about reopening (and those you anticipate will be asked even if they haven't yet) and start putting out answers to them. River City Church did an excellent FAQ section [at the bottom of this page](#).

4

Returning to Weekly Services

Church services are a part of church.

There's something about human nature that longs to connect with others. And there's something about the body of Christ that only feels right when we are gathered together in corporate worship.

Gathering is a part of what we do. Christians are supposed to meet together.

So it's no surprise that we want to meet again as soon as possible. As you plan to gather again, your worship services might look a little different.

And while you can certainly learn from what others are doing, there's no substitute for thinking through and answering the questions on your own. As you start planning Sunday services again, here are some questions to consider.

- How will you adjust to changing limitations on the size of gatherings? We mentioned the tiered approach earlier in this guide, but what does that

specifically look like for your church?

- Are you planning to add services to allow for smaller crowds? As you add services, how does that affect volunteers and musicians?
- How will you change the "greeting time" in service? And how will you train greeters, ushers, and guest services volunteers?
- How are you preparing for volunteers who aren't comfortable serving yet?
- How will you adjust communion, baptism, or "passing the plate"?
- What's your plan for blending in-person and online? As you gather again, there will be a lot of people who don't feel comfortable joining in person. You might have a larger audience online than in person. What are your plans for that?

There's something about the body of Christ that only feels right when we're gathered together.



It's not enough to wrestle through these questions; you need to document your answers. You need to write things down. We suggest at least three documents.

First, you need an internal guide for your staff, leaders, and key volunteers. [Here's a Word Document you can modify](#), but I can't stress this enough: do the work.

Use the guide as a template to guide your own discussions and make your own decisions. Don't just copy what other churches are doing since they are in different areas leading different people. Work through your own internal guide and create a document that answers all the questions.

Second, you need a simpler version of that guide that's suitable for the public. It should be something you can distribute publicly, put online, or develop into some FAQs on your website. How you communicate your reopening plans, safety procedures, and policies will go a long way toward helping people feel comfortable.

NEW POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

While "how often should we clean the bathrooms?" is an important question, it's unfortunately not the only new policy or procedure your church would need to reopen safely and smoothly. Answering a few more questions of your own can help you decide which new policies and procedures to implement.

What will we do about the kids ministry? Many churches are choosing not to reopen kids ministry immediately. But when you're ready to reopen kids ministry, create a separate policy for operating and cleaning that area (as Grace Chapel Community Church demonstrates [here](#) and as Epic Church did [in video form](#)).

What will we do and say if a church member tests positive for COVID-19? This is likely to happen eventually and has already occurred for many churches that have reopened. It's wise to outline a procedure and messaging for your church in the event that you find yourself in this predicament. [Download our example response plan here](#).

Is singing allowed? Some researchers have said that singing exacerbates aerosol transmission, suggesting that it is potentially dangerous for spreading COVID-19 in a church setting. Decide whether your church will sing as normal and what policy will be set to do it in the safest way possible. Check out [this resource](#) on congregational singing from The Gospel Coalition and [this one](#) published by a doctor writing for The Atlantic.

For determining any policy or procedure that your church creates, **start by considering what you're doing differently**. Those are the details that it's important to document and live out consistently.





As you plan to gather again, your
worship services might look a
little different.

5

Safety and Sanitation

To keep everyone as safe as possible, strategically planning your church's cleaning process is critical. It will be more advanced and intense than before. And, in the beginning, it will require asking a few main questions:

- Who is responsible for creating and rolling out safety measures?
- What changes will we make to serving communion, coffee, and refreshments?
- What measures do we need to take for cleaning before, during, and after services?
- Which areas in the church building need the most frequent sanitation?
- Which key team members and volunteers need to be most thoroughly trained in the new safety and sanitation policies?

And here are a few important questions to ask about specific areas in the church building.

- How often will you clean and disinfect the chairs, carpet, counters, and restrooms?
- Will you require (or does your government require)

face masks in order to enter the front doors?

- Where will you place or distribute hygiene supplies (hand sanitizer stations, sanitizing wipes, gloves, etc.)?
- Will you restrict access to water fountains?
- Which doors will be off-limits and which doors will be high-touch (requiring more frequent wipe-downs)?
- Will you restrict access to certain small, non-essential areas or hallways?
- What is your building capacity and how many people can your church safely accommodate to meet social distancing requirements?

As you and your team plan new cleaning guidelines and safety measures, there are three practices that will help you implement them with clarity and consistency.

#1 – DECIDE AND COMMUNICATE.

Once you've checked your state's requirements, it's time to make decisions on the safety equipment to buy and measures to put in place. For example, you might

need to order a hearty supply of face masks or hand sanitizer stations to install. And after you know what you'll do, let your greeters and other key staff members or volunteers know what to do.

The new safety measures and service changes might be challenging or feel unnatural to some. But make sure everyone understands the requirements and may even want to consider asking them to sign or initial the new policies. Which brings us to...

#2 – DOCUMENT IT.



One of our team values at Church Fuel is “write it down.” That’s because we’ve noticed how much more effective a system or process is when it’s documented. Anyone who needs to learn or refresh themselves on how things are done can refer to a clearly outlined document.

For every cleaning policy, create a document and checklist. You can have a separate policy for different areas in the building, checklists for before, during, and after services, and documents to keep an inventory of safety supplies. Print them out and use them every Sunday to make sure every area is sanitized properly.

[Click here to download our free cleaning checklist template.](#)

#3 – DEDICATE PEOPLE TO THE TASKS.

It takes a team to ensure that safety measures are

followed. If you don’t already have one, assemble a “cleaning crew” and designate a volunteer or staff member as the “cleaning coordinator” that oversees the completion of cleaning checklists.

From the parking lot to the lobby to the restrooms, you may need people to help “regulate” traffic and keep people a safe distance apart. And with some areas of the church now closed off or limiting the number of people at a time, your staff volunteers or volunteers can help make sure the guidelines for each area are followed.

IDEAS FOR MAINTAINING SAFETY

Identifiers – People’s comfort levels vary, which is why some churches have opted for policies that allow people to share how much physical contact they’re okay with right now (such as the [stickers](#) Covenant Love Church is using or [wristbands](#) like The Source Church).

Pre-registration – Asking people to sign up for church ahead of time gives you more control over safe building capacity numbers and more time to prepare to seat everyone at a safe distance. Services such as [Reopen church](#), [Eventbrite](#), or [Planning Center Registrations](#) can help you do this.

Outdoors – Some health experts have suggested that outdoor environments are safer for reducing the likelihood of transmitting the coronavirus. Pennington AG Church explained safety protocols for outdoor services [in this video](#). Surprise Church used [this page](#) to communicate details. Immanuel Church is hosting [drive-in services](#), a great options for smaller churches.

Alternating schedules – One week on and one week off for staff, volunteers or both is another way to have more control over building capacity. Stagger staff hours or alternate schedules. Ask certain people to work in-office or attend in person on the 1st and 3rd weeks or Sundays or 2nd and 4th weeks or Sundays only.

6

The New “Blended”

I remember the “worship wars” of the 1990s. Churches were debating between the value of traditional hymns and new choruses.

Even though this felt like a new conversation, it's been around in various formats since the middle ages. People criticized some of the hymn writers for borrowing popular melodies for their songs.

As some churches stayed traditional and others moved in a more modern direction, a third group of churches moved to a blended style.

I'm sure the worship wars are continuing somewhere, but it doesn't seem as important.

Instead, a new conversation is emerging.

Now more than ever, we need to blend physical services with a digital audience.

When you reopen the church, there will still be a lot of people who won't be comfortable in crowds. There will

be a segment of the population who prefers to watch from home. The online option will still be the front door for a lot of people.

Fifteen years ago, digital was an opportunity. Today, digital is a necessity.

If you return to normal without building on the digital strategy you've been forced to implement over the last few weeks, you will miss significant ministry opportunities. You'll risk losing relevance.

“So many church leaders are poised to re-embrace a model of ministry designed to reach a world that no longer exists,” warns Carey Nieuwhof.

This is why your church needs to advance your digital strategy and enlarge your digital footprint.

Don't see the livestream or the digital service as an add-on. Make it a significant part of your outreach strategy.





Now more than ever, we need to blend physical services with a digital audience.

And this digital approach to ministry goes way beyond streaming your church services.

Yes, that's a part of it, but it's a much bigger conversation.

"Digital is here to stay," writes Tony Morgan. "Churches need to shift to making this a primary platform for everything they do rather than just a stream of their Sunday services."

You can build community online.

You can run groups online.

You can have leadership team meetings online.

You can do discipleship and outreach online.

You can gather online.

Even when you return to traditional services, don't neglect your digital audience.

7

Continuing Online

Many church leaders (and online church attenders) have been introduced to the concept of digital ministry for the first time in the past few months.

The pivot to conducting church services, small groups, and most outreach online happened fast.

But as we consider the best ways to wisely and safely reopen our churches for in-person services in the future, it's important not to neglect the online audience.

Even as state-wide restrictions are lifted, some people won't feel comfortable attending church services in person for a while or may belong to the "high-risk" groups, as defined by the CDC, who are still advised to stay home as much as possible.

Remember the vulnerable and take precautions to protect them by not only implementing in-person safety measures to reopen the building but by continuing your online ministry—at least for the time being—to serve them and reach more people.

We know we don't want attending church to be viewed as optionable but for now, present returning to gathering in-person as an option. Communicate that online services will still be available and encourage high-risk people to stay home and connect with the church virtually.

Continue to post updates and send hopeful messages on social media, livestream or post video recordings of the services, and provide digital resources for studying the Bible and connecting in virtual small groups.

And whether you decide to reopen your church for in-person services soon or to hold off a little longer, use this time to refine your digital ministry strategy.





Use this time to refine your digital ministry strategy.

The COVID-19 pandemic isn't over yet, and we're still in a time of unprecedented opportunity for a thriving digital ministry and ways to reach people all over the world with the Gospel through online methods.

As Katie Allred of Church Communications said: "We rushed into this, but we don't have to rush out."

Even if your building reopens, dedicate some time to improving your online ministry and serving that audience, too.

Building an online version of your church may not have been the plan and still isn't the preference, but continuing your online services is a way to love your neighbor right now.

8

The Case to Not Reopen Too Fast

We know it's going to be different, but we want to meet again. We want to get back to "normal."

It's more than human nature—there's something theological happening here, too. The church is supposed to gather. Christians are supposed to meet.

But as states lift Executive Orders, we want to encourage you NOT to open up too soon. Even though we want to. Even though our people want to. Even though there's something inside pushing us to.

Besides not wanting to be labeled reckless by the community that we mentioned earlier, you also don't want your church members to get the wrong idea.

It's not only the perception of the community that matters, but the perception of your church members. For years and years, we have preached that the church is not a building.

We've told our people to not just come to a service, but go into the world. There are churches that have

signs on their doors as people are walking out that say, "You are now entering the mission field" or "Go be the church." Even as we moved online, we encouraged our members to "be the church," warning them against reducing everything to a livestream or online service.

So, what does it say if on the very front end when we can meet again—even when lots of people are advising against it and having questions—we rush back?

One of our ministry coaches, Matt, posted this in our Facebook group. He said, "Those churches that hurry back to worship will give members the perception that they need the public gathering to truly be the church. So all the things we've been telling them all along about church happening, wherever you are, we'll sound hypocritical now."

We want to gather. We want to meet again. And that's a good thing.



But if you make it all about the meeting, then we are reinforcing the opposite of what we've been trying to teach. It doesn't mean that the gatherings are unimportant or that they are not crucial to who we are. But don't give your people the wrong idea that we can't be who we need to be without gathering in a building.

We also encourage you not to exhaust your resources trying to solve temporary problems.

There is a thankfulness that will emerge out of this time as a lot of churches are rethinking what they're doing. They are looking at their strategy, their ministry, and their programming in light of cultural change. There's a bit of a reset happening. Five years from now, when we look back on this time, we will realize that we re-evaluated quite a bit.

We redefined the term "essential." We built muscles we didn't even know we had. We learned a lot of things we didn't want to learn but they turned out to be helpful. We figured out how to expand our digital footprint. We learned how to build a community online. We learned how to be incredibly responsive. We flexed an innovation muscle.

But what if we paused during this intermediate time and thought more deeply now? In the time between when we can legally gather and when we should gather, what if we leveraged our time to continue getting good at things that can help us for years to come?

These new skills and muscles we're developing will help us for years to come, not just the last few weeks.

Yes, we could rush back and quickly figure out changing guidelines, investing tons of man-hours and resources into solving a temporary problem. Or we could continue to build digital momentum, holding back the tide, until it's not just safe but when it can truly kickstart momentum.

Build skills that you can use for the long haul; don't just scramble to solve problems that only provide a quick fix. We should view this pause as an opportunity to reset, not just rush back because we miss what we had. Of course, we miss our gatherings, but let's not just run back to what is comfortable and familiar. Let's embrace this time of learning and experimenting.

Alan Hirsh said this... "If you want to learn how to play chess, you should start by removing your own queen. Once you've mastered the game without the most powerful piece, then put the queen back in and see how good you are! For the church, the Sunday service is our queen. We've been relying on it too much. Now that the queen has been taken off the board it's time to rediscover what all the other pieces can do."

When you gather again, you will have new skills. You will be better. It's not that we want to forever do church without the gatherings. We want to have those things, and we need to bring those things back. But it's okay to temporarily build other parts of a healthy church. It doesn't make the queen unimportant, it just means it's not all about the queen.

Maybe this time of waiting is an opportunity. To reset. To rest. To reevaluate. To refocus. And to come back better.

Conclusion

As you pray and plan to reopen your church, there are unhealthy mindsets you'll need to fight.

The first says that your church has to be the first to reopen. But it's better to be wise and be safe than to be first.

Another says that if you don't reopen as soon as possible, the people in your church will go elsewhere to or get too accustomed to watching online. But it's more important to look out for their safety than to let a fear of their leaving make decisions for you.

If you've read this guide and determined that now is not the right time to reopen your church, don't fret. There are alternatives that ensure your church can worship safely and return to in-person services gradually.

You can continue online-only and set dates for re-evaluating when to reopen the building. Open up in phases, starting with small groups meeting in-person with ten people or less.

Plan for multiple scenarios and don't tie your worth as a leader or your church's success to a particular outcome. Consider a tiered approach. Brace yourself for when changes happen—as we've seen, they will. And they often come faster than we're ready for.

Our ultimate advice? Don't rush back to meeting.

Consider what's best for your church and how you can use resources wisely. Embrace the season, plan strategically, and take a safe, wise path to reopening.



Thoughts? Questions? Ideas?

We hope that the ideas in this book help you and your church get started in making a prayerful, strategic decision about reopening in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. We love hearing from you, so please let us know what is working for you, what's not, share your stories with us, and discuss anything in this eBook with us.

We're praying for you as you continue to reach people, whether inside or outside of your church building.



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