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# Future Corporate Gatherings of the Church Family

*A Few Principles and Practices to Ponder Prayerfully*

Greg Strand (/blog/authors/greg-strand) | April 21, 2020



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At the beginning of shelter at home orders, most of us were thinking about what living through this might mean, what it might entail. After living this way for the past many weeks, and with some changes on the curve, many are now beginning to think about what life and church gatherings might look like on the other side, once the shelter at home orders are lessened.

This will not be like flipping a switch such that once we are no longer quarantined everything will go back to the way it was before the pandemic. It will certainly not, though we are praying expectantly, trusting the Lord, that it will be better. We do know changes will be incremental.

On April 16, **Guidelines for Opening Up America Again**

(<https://www.scribd.com/document/456751209/Reopening-Guidelines>) were distributed to governors during a meeting with the White House. This now serves as a guide for the days ahead. It is also critical to follow the orders of the state governor and the city mayor, reflecting care and concern for the well-being of the community. This is a way we express our love to others.

As there are lessening of restrictions incrementally, what will that mean for churches when we can eventually meet? What is the plan and counsel?

As you have this discussion as a church, begin by asking what will remain and what will go away with how we have gathered and functioned as a church virtually? How do we use this unique experience and opportunity given by God to form new life groups, to add more ministries, to expand our ministry online? What do we learn from this experience?

It would be pastorally wise for pastors/elders to communicate with the church family some of this information, and what some of the forthcoming plans may be. It may be nothing more than that we are thinking about the day when we can gather again as a church family, even though likely with limited numbers. For example, based on the Guidelines released to governors, we can surmise that the resumption will first move to allowing <50 people to gather, under strict criteria. We can also assume that “opening up” will happen incrementally. This means that some will be able to gather corporately, with proper social distancing, while others will have to continue to participate via livestream or recording. Or it might mean you add multiple services to accommodate the guidelines for limited numbers to gather.

This communication would help the church family to be reassured you are thinking about such matters, and you care for them and are looking out for their well-being. Here are a few examples of issues to consider and questions to ask immediately and

longer term, specifically and more generally. (This list was originally compiled by Alejandro Mandes, executive director of all people initiative, to which I have adapted, edited, and added.)

1. Before gathering again as the church family, there should be a “deep cleaning“ of the church facility. Through this gesture, you express love and concern for others (Eph. 5:2), and you remove a potential obstacle or reason not to gather. Additionally, it reflects kind and gracious hospitality (Rom. 12:13; Heb. 13:2; 1 Pet. 4:9). And what will you do to ensure the facility is properly cleaned after a gathering?
2. Plan “welcome back” listening sessions to reintegrate. Explain what social distancing looks like in the church context. Spacing the chairs may require more services. There might be signs put up to remind people of the new social conventions.
3. Supplies: What should the church order now to have on hand by the beginning of the public, corporate service? When public gatherings are allowed again, even with social distancing, be prepared for another run on masks and hand sanitizer. You may also want to consider disinfecting stations in the building. It might be wise to order these materials now for your initial gathering weeks into the future.
4. Recruit and train spiritual counselors and mentors. People will be processing this whole experience, and for many, they have and are experiencing stages of grief, as if someone has died (in many instances, that will have been the case). Even if there is not a physical death, there is a death of dreams, events and experiences. There is grief and it is real. But it does not have the final word. For Christians grief is with hope (1 Thess. 4:13, 18). This is a wonderful time to disciple others with the truths of God and his Word.
5. Identify and equip prayer warriors and have them engage in this vital ministry of prayer before, during, and after all services. If prayer is a chief exercise of our faith, intercessory is a chief expression of our love for others (cf. Jesus intercessory prayer for his adopted sons and daughters, Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25; 1 Jn. 2:1).
6. How will we advise regarding children’s ministry? Should there not be children’s Sunday school for a while? What about nursery? How are parents processing this for their children?

7. Should snacks/drinks even be offered? Should coffee, juices, snacks be phased in?
8. Here are a few order of service matters to think through regarding corporate worship:
  - Instructions for “greeting time” in order not to be confused and awkward at that point in the service. Handshakes and hugs are no longer permissible for the foreseeable future. Elbow bumps might be more fitting for now.
  - What will we do for collecting the offering? Will we pass the plate?
  - What will be our plan for Communion? Share a single loaf and cup? Pass the loaf and cup?
  - What will be your practice for baptism?
9. Will we commence Adult Bible Fellowships or adult Sunday School? With what format and structure? How will this correlate with the nursery ministry and children’s Sunday school?
10. What advice and counsel will we give to small groups associated with the church, meeting either in the church or in homes?
11. What will we do with summer ministries like Vacation Bible School or Backyard Bible Clubs? And what about future ministries in which we travel to some other place to attend a gathering or a Bible camp or a conference, like Challenge?
12. In it all, love God and love others (Matt. 22:37-39; Lk. 10:27). Remember, bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2), and love covers a multitude of sins (1 Pet. 4:8). By God’s grace, live the Beatitudes as members of the kingdom (Matt. 5:3-12), keep in step with the Spirit (Gal. 5:16, 18, 25), bear the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), and exude an aroma of Christ (2 Cor. 2:14-17).

Here is another helpful list of questions to consider: **24 Questions Your Church Should Answer Before People Return** (<https://kenbraddy.com/2020/04/18/20-questions-your-church-should-answer-before-people-return/>)

Vanderbloemen held a conversation with several pastors of large churches: **ReOpening Church: Leading After COVID-19**

([https://www.vanderbloemen.com/blog/reopening-the-church-after-covid19?utm\\_campaign=COVID19&utm\\_source=hs\\_email&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_conter](https://www.vanderbloemen.com/blog/reopening-the-church-after-covid19?utm_campaign=COVID19&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_conter))

-7Nv6TV2T2ahFT0a3hLOzyi6dpLttHro14sngHFc8dgPXjyUBisVZIrHQ\_Q1XyqHwl-aB5Nc2JNEMMq9YOHn9Q6-TjPA&\_hsmi=86581021) They are planning to follow this with a dialogue with pastors from smaller churches.

Many more of these lists will be forthcoming, similar to the plethora of writings guiding us how to think about and process being the church virtually at the front-end of our shelter at home orders. The key is not that you read every one of them, but rather that you discern the most important questions for you as a church to ask and answer, based on your geographical location and church size. And through it all, prayerfully seek wisdom that comes from above (Jms. 1:5; 3:17), heed the federal, state and city directives, seek the best input and counsel available from public health officials and epidemiologists, and trust the Lord (Ps. 20:7; Prov. 3:5-6).

Might this be a day of spiritual renewal and revival? Might it be, Lord, might it be!



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