



GUIDELINES FOR REOPENING YOUR CHURCH

Churches should implement plans to reopen and operate their ministries according to the [guidance](#) of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), along with state and local guidance that does not violate the First Amendment and other religious freedom protections. As of February 2021, there is no longer an outright prohibition on indoor worship in any state. However, there are still state and local ordinances in certain parts of the country that require churches to operate at limited capacity or abide by certain health mandates. So long as these requirements do not unfairly restrict churches, these requirements should be followed in most cases.

What follows are best practices and tips for churches and places of worship as they reopen.

ENCOURAGE AT-RISK INDIVIDUALS AND THOSE WITH SYMPTOMS OF ILLNESS TO STAY AT HOME

As churches are reconvening for public worship, some people in high-risk demographics should be encouraged to not physically attend regular worship services. Vulnerable individuals (the elderly and people with certain underlying medical conditions) and those waiting to receive a vaccine should be careful. Churches should attend to these congregants and, if possible, make special accommodation for them—such as continuing to live-stream worship services, provide drive-in services, or provide a senior service, exclusively for those 65 and above to attend in person.

EXERCISE BEST SANITATION PRACTICES

Churches should implement best sanitation practices. Consider implementing the following protocols:

- Take the temperature of people who attend services.
- Require everyone to use hand sanitizer upon entering the building.
- Nurseries and youth areas should comply with the latest CDC [guidelines](#) for childcare facilities.
- Regularly disinfect high traffic areas, including restroom facilities.
- Remind members to cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue.
- Encourage members to wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.

MAKE OTHER APPROPRIATE ADJUSTMENTS

In addition to the sanitation practices, churches should consider these guidelines:

- Provide masks for those who attend services, meetings, and Bible studies. Wearing masks could be mandatory or optional, depending on state and local guidance and the discretion of church leadership.
- Encourage online giving. Those who attend in-person services should be encouraged to place tithes and offerings in a central collection box (such as a basket placed near the back of the sanctuary).
- Consider closing certain common areas where people are more likely to closely interact.
- If churches choose to pass out literature, ensure that ushers are wearing gloves and that any material handed out to parishioners has been sanitized.
- When administering the Lord's Supper, provide the elements individually.
- If your church has greeters at the doors, make sure they do not shake hands with members and visitors. Likewise, many churches have a "greeting time" as part of their liturgy. Waving or bumping elbows could take the place of hand shaking.
- Adjust seating configurations to allow for increased social distancing. For churches that use individual chairs, consider spacing the chairs out. For churches with pews, consider roping off every other pew. Families could be encouraged to sit together but maintain the recommended distance of six feet between families.
 - Churches may take different approaches to this based on their circumstances and set-up, building size, number of facilities, and their configuration. Some churches may need to have multiple services to enable proper social distancing. Others may be able to spread out over their different facilities. Outdoor services could be a viable option for some churches (a nearby park, field, or parking lot may provide enough space that allows for social distancing).
 - Churches should consider instituting a graduated process of capping attendance. A church might start by allowing a certain level of occupancy and subsequently raise it by a percentage as guidelines allow for further opening up. As the occupancy cap increases, the number of different facilities in use will go down.
- Pastors set the tone for their flock. Consider going out of your way to model recommended behavior. Your calm and cheerful demeanor can encourage congregants to adopt best practices.

FOLLOW REASONABLE STATE AND LOCAL GUIDANCE

So long as restrictions are temporary, applied equally to religious and nonreligious gatherings alike, and there is a good reason for putting them in place, government restrictions are not likely to violate religious freedom protections. However, many authorities, most notably those in California, have treated religious entities more restrictively than nonreligious entities. However, since November 2020, the United States Supreme Court has issued several rulings making it clear that state and local authorities cannot treat houses of worship unfairly. As a result of these decisions, states like New York and California have backed off from outright bans on indoor worship and stringent attendance caps that made meeting practically impossible.

Romans 13 instructs Christians to be subject to the governing authorities. As we emerge from the pandemic and return to normalcy, civil authorities are seeking to make the best decisions for their communities, and churches should seek to be part of the solution by cooperating with those responsible for public safety. For example, some governments are still requiring social distancing protocols even though other restrictions have eased. The general easing of one type of restriction, but retaining of others, does not necessarily violate the law. If, however, there is evidence that government officials are unfairly singling out churches and other religious activities for restriction, it may violate religious freedom protections.

Throughout this reopening process, pastors should stay flexible and aware of the approach their state and local governments are taking. For further discussion of churches reopening, [see](#) “It is Time for Churches to Reopen: Theological and Legal Implications of Unfair Restrictions on Churches.”

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