

As we hear the announcements that our nation and state are going to slowly reopen, the Bishop and the Cabinet of the Western North Carolina Conference encourage all local churches to continue to follow the guidelines of the CDC as well as state and local officials regarding the resumption of in-person worship. Please continue to guide **all** your decisions by Jesus' command to "love one another." Covid-19 has not been eradicated, and thus we continue to need to protect the most vulnerable among us.

The following are 24 questions to consider as you make plans for persons to return to your church building and activities. These have been adapted from the blog by Ken Braddy, "24 Questions Your Church Should Answer Before People Return."

<https://kenbraddy.com/2020/04/18/20-questions-your-church-should-answer-before-people-return/>

- 1. What if your worship gathering is initially limited to no more than 100 people?**
Remember that we have been limited to gatherings of no more than 10 people in the recent past. If we are limited to a smaller number of people by our government leaders, what is the plan at your church to provide a place and time for them to worship?
- 2. What adjustments will you make to observing the sacraments of Communion and Baptism? Your choir ministry?** Do you believe you can conduct communion like you have in the past? What about baptism? What do you do about your choir since people standing side-by-side may not be practical or safe?
- 3. Are you holding Vacation Bible School or delaying it until later?** This is a big question on people's minds. There are alternatives, of course. Many churches that are delaying VBS until August are using it as a big back-to-school event. Other churches are using their VBS materials in backyard Bible clubs with smaller groups. Other churches are going to do VBS over 5 weeks, one day a week (such as Sunday night), or they plan to use VBS resources during the fall.
- 4. Is a physical "pass the plate" offering a thing of the past?** How would you feel if you were the 100th person in a worship service to touch the offering plate that 99 other people just touched? Would you be worried about COVID-19 transmission? How will you take up your weekly offering? Will you install boxes at the doors of the sanctuary or in the lobby so that worshipers can slide their envelopes, cash, or checks into secured boxes?
- 5. What are you doing now to sanitize and sterilize your church building?** Now is the time to wipe down all classrooms (especially those where children meet because of the toys and other items they touch during a Sunday or weekday class experience). Have you sprayed pews and chairs with disinfectant? Who is wiping doorknobs and handles? Have you had the carpet cleaned and disinfected? Now is the time for this to take place to be prepared for the "you can go back to church" announcement by government officials.
- 6. Are you going to continue offering children's church?** Can you guarantee moms and dads that their children will be safe in a room in which a group gathers for a children's worship

time? As an alternative, is it time to encourage family worship as *the* primary option in these COVID-19 days? Should parents take their children to worship, practice physical distancing, and keep a close eye on their little ones? How might your service need to change to engage children in worship? How would such changes affect the physical space of the sanctuary or narthex?

7. **Are you going to continue hosting special events?** Will your church continue to host weddings? How about funerals? Revivals? Children's programs? Which special events will continue, and which ones will be put on hold? And how will you explain which ones continue and which ones do not?
8. **Are you continuing to provide coffee and refreshments?** Is that a good idea anymore? Tables and chairs may need to be placed in storage so that people do not congregate within a couple of feet of one another.
9. **Will you continue offering virtual online worship?** Some churches may think of their recent foray into Facebook Live as a means to provide a worship experience for their people a thing of the past – a stopgap measure during some really strange days. Happy they can meet together again; Facebook Live services may give way to worship in the sanctuary. But is that the right strategy? Many church leaders report that their worship attendance and Bible study attendance are up – significantly – because people are finding them online. How can you include this option as a part of the ministry of your church?
10. **What is your plan when volunteers step down?** What happens when your older volunteers share that they do not feel comfortable teaching the preschool and children's classes until a vaccine is readily available? They are concerned that it is just too risky for them because they are most at risk from COVID-19. Younger families may be hesitant to return because of the fear of exposing their children to COVID-19. If you cannot find enough volunteers what will you do?
11. **What is your strategy to clean and sanitize your church in real time?** In addition to preparing in advance for people to return to the church building, how will you keep the place clean and disinfected? Does this give rise to a new team of people on campus whose ministry it is to walk around wiping doorknobs and other surfaces? Who is going to clean restrooms throughout the time that the church building is open?
12. **Do door greeters do their jobs differently, or at all?** In a COVID-19 world, do you really want a door greeter holding the door open while a parishioner walks by within a foot or two of them? That is not in line with good physical distancing practices, is it? The new normal may be for greeters to stand back six feet, inside the church building, and welcome people verbally without opening the door for them.
13. **Is this the time to end your church's passing of the peace ("meet and greet") time?** Because of physical distancing rules, it is. Many churches have already abandoned it

because of its ineffectiveness with guests, not because of COVID-19 concerns. Is that true for your church?

14. **Because people may return very slowly to church, how will you count attendance and effectiveness?** The question has already been raised about should we or should we not take attendance during online worship and online group Bible studies. It is almost a sure thing that worship attendance will not be what it was pre-COVID-19. You need to decide now how to add online attendance, too. How will group leaders take a count in their online groups and go about reporting that?
15. **Should you add and/or shorten worship services to allow for social distancing?** If physical gatherings are limited in size, you have a few options: (1) offer more services (2) encourage people to continue worshipping online (3) remove chairs from your worship center to help people avoid close contact (4) block off pews so that people no longer sit right behind someone, reducing the chances of them sneezing or coughing directly into the back of the person in front of them. If your church reopens with the “worship only” option, you will have to decide these things now.
16. **What are you going to do about larger Sunday School groups?** Do you feel good about letting 25 or more senior adults meet in a room that holds, well, 25 or 30 senior adults? There is not going to be a quick and easy solution to this.
17. **What is your plan for Sunday School curriculum?** Most churches have provided print products –some adults still refer to them as “quarterlies” because they are distributed at church at the beginning of a new quarter. But because of social distancing and the new emphasis on virtual groups, should you keep print products but add digital ones for those groups meeting online?
18. **Will you reopen the doors of your church with a “worship only” strategy?** This option might be the best choice whenever we meet again in our church buildings. If necessary, you can add services, remove chairs, practice social distancing, and focus on regaining momentum in worship. Bible study and other small groups could remain online for safety in the short-term and be added back in time.
19. **Do you have a plan for reducing expenses if your church offerings do not rebound?** Churches need to be thinking, “What if...” – what if our offerings do not hold steady because of rising unemployment of members? Before the church returns to the building, every church needs a “plan B” strategy just in case giving drops in late summer or early fall.
20. **How will you deal with the rise of COVID-19 related addictions?** One mental health expert said in a webinar meeting last week, “I’m hearing that porn sites are giving away free memberships during COVID-19...just what people don’t need.” In that same webinar, the presenter assured the audience that substance abuse is on the rise, too. Alcohol sales are soaring. He cautioned us to be ready to refer people to professionals in our post-COVID-19 reality.

21. **Are you going to decrease the fellowship time between worship services or between worship and Sunday School?** Churches often value the opportunity to gather, have coffee, and fellowship. In a COVID-19 world, it is a good idea *not* to let that happen. Shorter times between events and the elimination of refreshments will help keep people moving to their next destination, a worship service, small group, or Sunday School class, and it will help reduce the possibility of “hanging out and giving each other COVID-19.”
22. **Are you going to cancel mid-week meals, worship, and small groups?** In the near future, following the return of the church to its building, will you continue a virtual, online prayer meeting and Bible study time? Can you find volunteer workers to support a Wednesday night strategy at the church? Do you want to put many people around tables for the traditional mid-week meal? Remember, you will not have to cancel these ministries forever.
23. **Should you be investing in new digital equipment right now?** Yes, we have all hopped online and used Facebook Live to broadcast our worship services. Some of us are doing that with iPads and other devices, but is this the time to admit that online worship is probably here to stay? If yes, then it makes sense to invest dollars now so that cameras and other equipment can be purchased that will help the church be more professional in the new online world of worship.
24. **Will a new staff or volunteer position emerge from COVID-19?** Because the church has permanently moved online now, could it lead to the adoption of a new position of leadership? Will churches turn their attention to a staff person whose job it is to oversee the technical aspects of the new digital frontier? Will this person become responsible to develop groups and strategies to reach people online? It’s highly likely that your first inclination will be to give this responsibility to a staff person or laity leader who is currently serving the church, but consider how important it might be for someone solely devoted to developing a team whose focus it is to reach, nurture, and disciple those who worship online.

Across our conference, clergy and laity have continued to be creative, innovative, and courageous in leading ministry in this unprecedented time. Your faithful oversight of the ministries of the local church has been exemplary. We give thanks for all that you and the churches you serve are doing to be the Church, offering the light and love of Christ in the midst of this pandemic. We thank our God “through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world.” Romans 1:8.