

American Baptist Churches, USA

Conversation Guide to Reopening Your Church Building

As local, state and governmental leaders begin to announce plans for reopening the country, it seems wise for pastors and church leaders to begin holding conversations and making preparations for reopening our places of worship. It is important to recognize that safety concerns will require our worship and ministry to be conducted differently as we return to a new reality. Gathering guidelines from officials may be implemented in stages and may be different from one county to the next. Advance preparation may be the key to keeping persons safe when we return to our activities. This guide is designed to help you ponder various points of consideration as your church implements new methods, policies and procedures. It specifically focuses on two core areas, the physical and the personal.

Physical

The first step in considering how to safely practice ministry is to prepare your facility for ministry in this new era. Walk through your entire campus with fresh eyes toward upkeep and cleanliness. The overall appearance of your building and grounds will speak to your congregants and guests louder than ever about your emphasis upon health and safety.

Overall Considerations

1. What medical professionals can you work with to help develop best practices related to the health of your congregants and guests?
2. What can you do to help your congregants and guests easily discern that your facility is a safe, clean location for their family and friends to be present?

Cleaning and Sanitizing Before Persons Arrive

Protocols should be implemented to reduce the spread of viruses in your building.

1. What areas of the church building need to be deep cleaned before anyone returns?
2. Who can be recruited to help prepare the church for the reopening?
3. What resources are needed for cleaning? Are cleaning materials generally available or do they need to be ordered?
4. What ongoing (daily, weekly, monthly) cleaning protocols need to be developed and implemented once you are meeting again?

Contact Mitigation While People Are On Campus

Procedures and Processes should be developed to minimize personal contact and to frequently sanitize high touch surfaces when guests are on campus. Reports suggest that COVID-19 contaminants can remain on metal surfaces for up to 72 hours and other surfaces for up to 48 hours.

1. What resources need to be purchased and stationed throughout the building for use while people gather, i.e. hand sanitizer, disinfectant spray/wipes, masks? Because availability of these supplies might be limited and prioritized to healthcare facilities, how will you gather them?
2. What practices could you put in place that will mitigate any virus spread? For example, greeters wiping down doorknobs, bathrooms cleaned and sanitizing between services, etc.

Deferred Maintenance

As you walk the grounds and building with fresh eyes in preparation for a return to on-campus activities, make note of items that need attention. The tour will no doubt reveal items of varying expense, but pass along the items to the appropriate group for attention, and address any items that can be tackled immediately.

1. What areas of the campus need an additional refresh or tidying up to exhibit a better overall cleanliness to your congregants and guests?
2. What is the cost of these projects?
3. Who can be recruited to do help?
4. What resources do they need?
5. What are the priorities based on urgency and availability of resources?

Personal

Both persons and places will have been affected by COVID-19. The lingering effects of grief, economic distress, isolation, and other negative impacts from the pandemic will create new needs among congregants. People have been hurt and scar tissue may be present. It may take a while to discern the range and depth of these needs. Some needs may be met with technical and strategic fixes, while others will require experimentation and adaptation.

Leadership

Crises often present unique opportunities for leadership. Gather your leadership team to navigate the transitioning back into the use of your facilities. Review your identity, mission, and vision in light of the changing times. There will naturally be new ministry challenges and opportunities. Consider releasing some previous ministry activities for which the pandemic revealed less of a need in order to respond to the new challenges and opportunities.

1. How can you communicate to your church and community the steps that you are taking to maintain clean and safe conditions on campus and a relevant ministry future?
2. What has your deep dive into technology taught you? What good habits has your church embraced these past months that you can immediately integrate, for example, online care through small groups, digital communication, and streaming worship services?
3. What should you stop doing? What should you begin? What meetings have not been held and not been missed! What needs pruning?
4. Should church staff job descriptions be altered in light of released responsibilities and new needs and opportunities?
5. What is your plan if the decision to open up the country is reversed and new stay-at-home mandates are delivered?

Worship Services

Adapting elements in your worship service and other building activities to incorporate needed distancing may be the new reality.

1. What special celebration will you plan the first time that you worship again after the building has been off-limits? Special worship services lend themselves to creativity and exploration.
2. What adjustments in seating can you create to foster wise distancing, for example, adding a worship service, increasing spacing among chairs, marking certain pews or sections as available or not available for seating?
3. Should some persons be encouraged to stay at home for safety reasons? How will you make that determination?
4. How will you involve members who need to continue to worship at home for safety reasons during the initial stages of reopening?
5. How will you welcome new persons who have been worshipping with you on-line and are now present with you?
6. What alternatives to traditional practices of receiving the offering, passing the peace, passing the communion plates, and coffee hour can be put in place in order to limit physical contact?
7. Do policies and procedures for baptism need to be changed during the social distancing phase?
8. What alternate pathways of connecting could you implement to limit physical interaction, for example creating digital welcome cards for sermon response, putting worship guides on tables, removing hymnals and only using overhead screens, etc.?

Ministries

Addressing ministry needs will probably be more complex and unique when people leave their homes. Expect persons not to be the same as in pre-pandemic days when they return...

1. What about scheduling and holding the memorial services, home goings, and remembrances of people who died during the time of “stay at home” orders?
2. How will you address the personal and family struggles that may have surfaced in the last couple of months among those experiencing marital problems, financial strains, emotional and physical abuse, job loss, etc.?
3. How could you create a hybrid between physically present and on-line platforms for those unable or hesitant to return to campus in the near future as well as for the broader community wanting to remain connected from afar? How can new opportunities be created for those present and those at home for Bible studies, small groups, prayer meetings, ministry teams, committees and boards?
4. Will your church continue to offer childcare during church activities in the same way that it did before? If so, what additional precautions will you take in this area, such as temperature checks, snack time modifications, etc.?
5. What preparations do you need to begin making now to be ready for adjustments to your summer and fall church activities such as VBS, mission trips, etc.?
6. What new means of support can be put in place to support new ministry opportunities?

Financial

There will be few church budgets that remain unaffected by the global pandemic. Consider conducting a financial assessment of restricted and unrestricted funds.

1. Can you schedule a conversation with your treasurer or finance committee to review your assets and liabilities as well as your current income statement?
2. How does giving compare to beginning of the year projections? Can you project short-term and long-term trends on giving? What is the bottom-line impact of these giving trends?
3. Cleaning and contact mitigation efforts will be an ongoing expense that is most likely beyond current budget planning. How will you fund these required resources? Can the funding include donations of cleaning supplies, volunteer assistance, and specialized giving?
4. What new ministry opportunities have you identified and what are the costs associated with them?
5. What resources are available to you from the government and the denomination?
6. Can you make immediate church budget adjustments or do changes require church-wide approval?