

DECIDING WHEN & HOW YOU SHOULD RETURN TO CHURCH IN PERSON

A Practical Guide for Church Members

Table of Contents

1.	How to Make Your Decision	3
2.	How to Approach Reopening Prayerfully	5
3.	How to Move Forward Biblically	7
4.	How to Understand Your Risks Using Science	9
5.	How to Know If Your Church is Reopening Well	11
6.	How to Return with Practical Wisdom	13
7.	How to Love Your Neighbor While Churches Reopen	16
8.	How to Care for Yourself Faithfully	18
	Benediction	20
	Appendix: Should I Be Attending Worship Services At My Church?	21
	About Us	22

Chapter 1. How to Make Your Decision

“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body... Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many... But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it (1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 24-26). As Paul wrote in Corinthians, as Christ’s body, we suffer together, we rejoice together, and we move forward knowing that we are both different and united in Christ.

The church never closed during COVID-19—just the doors to our buildings.

Churches across the country are deciding when and how to restart in-person gatherings. Just as government leaders, health officials, and church leaders have been wrestling with the questions of when and how to go back to church safely, you also need to answer these questions personally.

While we all want to be together in person again, it’s important to understand the different factors involved in that decision. If we gather, we want to do so in a way that doesn’t bring unnecessary risk to ourselves or the vulnerable in our community. We understand that choosing to gather in person has caused some to experience conflicting emotions and concerns, which is why we have written this manual.

Our hope is that the questions and recommendations provided throughout this guide will provide you with what you need to make faithful and well-informed decisions for you and your family during COVID-19. Overall, this guide will help you navigate returning to in-person church services by walking you through a biblical and prayerful approach, helping you understand possible risks, and sharing ways to care for yourself and those around you.

Four Commitments to Guide Decision Making

- **Humility:** Humbly examine your possible biases, influences, pressures, strengths, and weaknesses that could have a negative effect on your ability to make wise decisions.
- **Love:** Follow the biblical call to love your neighbor (Mark 12:31) in how and when you decide to return to your church and in-person ministries so that you can help and do not inadvertently cause harm.
- **Persistence:** Mentally approach navigating COVID-19 as a marathon—not a sprint—by keeping a long-term view in mind (e.g., Scripture talks about finishing the race, not being first in the race).
- **Wisdom:** With information and guidelines frequently changing, stay current on recent updates from trusted and vetted sources.

¹All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Because what we know about COVID-19 and the challenges it presents are changing so rapidly, we encourage you to regularly visit our website with the National Association of Evangelicals: reopeningthechurch.com. We will be regularly supplementing this guide with resources as research and science progress. We also encourage you to regularly check this website for up-to-date and vetted information from other trusted resources.

Three Precautions to Keep in Mind

The majority of people are taking the pandemic very seriously and adopting safety measures. As you begin to re-enter group gatherings, it's important to start from the idea that people are doing the best they can. Respond in grace rather than frustration, while always keeping safety in mind.

- **Habits are hard to break.** What happens in churches is inherently social and relational. We eat together; we sing together; we embrace one another; we care for one another's children. These familiar patterns have been ingrained in us through years of meeting together, and may be challenging for many to shake these habits even when we know the risk and have a plan in place.
- **Viewpoints will differ.** Not everyone in your church is going to agree on how the reopening process should happen. This could lead to potential risky behaviors and possibly cause some divisions in congregations where a unified approach is especially important.
- **The plan won't go perfectly.** Even if the planning is perfect and your fellow churchgoers intend to engage in safe practices, people are naturally bad at predicting risk. They may go in the wrong door. During a conversation, they may drift closer than six feet away. Having realistic expectations will help you make decisions.

See Appendix: Should I Be Attending Worship Services at My Church? at the end of this manual for a decision tree tool to help you navigate when and how to return to in-person church services and go to reopeningthechurch.com for more decision-making tools.

Prayer: God, we ask for your grace and guidance for decisions, and for your close presence as we walk through uncertain and challenging times.

Chapter 2. How to Approach Reopening Prayerfully

“If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you” (James 1:5). Throughout Scripture we are reminded that we serve a God who hears us. As you think through the reentry decision, begin with prayer—don’t leave it for the last resort. Deciding when and how to return to in-person services amidst COVID-19 requires deep thought and wisdom. Remember God’s faithfulness in giving wisdom to those who ask for it.

During recent months, we’ve all been figuring out what it means to be the body of Christ during a pandemic. What has not changed is our call to pray for wisdom, for one another, and for those who lead. As you converse with and listen to God through prayer about COVID-19, you might find that sometimes you can’t find the right words or don’t quite know where to start.

Here are example prayers you can adapt as you seek God’s guidance during these challenging days.

God, grant us health and safety.

God, keep me, my family, my community, and my church family from all harm. Preserve our physical and mental health as we seek to serve you faithfully.

“Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well” (3 John 1:2).

God, grant us humility.

As I seek your will, clothe me with the humility that comes from you. As I seek wise counsel, teach me what it looks like to submit to you.

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Colossians 3:12).

God, grant us wisdom.

Lord, you are a gracious guide. Show me the paths that you have prepared and teach me to walk in your ways.

“If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you” (James 1:5).

God, grant us courage.

If you lead me to make decisions that may be unpopular, grant me courage to do what you’ve called and equipped me to do.

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9).

God, grant us patience.

During these stressful times, I pray that all of us in the church family would practice patience with one another.

“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:2).

God, grant us unity.

Within our body, Lord, people are of different minds about how to faithfully proceed. Grant us unity so that we might walk together in mind and thought.

“I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought” (1 Corinthians 1:10).

God, grant us resources.

As we all—individuals and families and organizations—adjust to an ever-changing social and financial climate, I appeal to you to be the good provider who blesses us with all we need to be faithful to you.

“And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work” (1 Corinthians 9:8).

God, grant us refreshment.

God, many of us feel weary, but you are the one who refreshes souls. Protect my church family and church leaders from burnout and renew our hearts.

“He refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake” (Psalm 23:3).

God, grant us love and support.

Lord, I pray for the individuals, families, and leaders of my church. Give us the time, opportunity, and grace to love and be loved.

“Do everything in love” (1 Corinthians 16:14).

God, meet the needs of those of which I’m not aware.

Jesus, you know every hair on our heads. I ask that you would meet the needs of others of which I’m not even aware. Thank you for your gracious care.

“We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans” (Romans 8:26).

Prayer: God, thank you for hearing when we call on you and for knowing what we need, even before we do. Thank you for your Spirit who “intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.”

Chapter 3. How to Move Forward Biblically

“For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). God gives us Scripture that is alive and active by the Spirit. As you make this decision, steep yourself in the Word, allowing it to lead and guide you.

Below are 20 verses of Scripture to help you hear God’s voice in this challenging season of COVID-19. By no means is this an exhaustive list; however, we have found these verses helpful in the face of adversity. We pray you will discover fresh hope and encouragement from these verses that testify to God’s steadfast faithfulness in the midst of these uncertain times.

<p>God sees us. - Genesis 16:13</p>	<p>God hears us. - Jonah 2:2</p>	<p>God is with us. - Psalm 23:4</p>	<p>God is for us. - Lamentations 3:33</p>	<p>Nothing can separate us from the love of God. - Romans 8:39</p>
<p>God knows our suffering. - Exodus 2:25</p>	<p>God is near the brokenhearted. - Psalm 34:18</p>	<p>We can look to God when we are feeling helpless and confused. - 2 Chronicles 20:12</p>	<p>God receives us when we’re overwhelmed. - Matthew 11:28</p>	<p>God loves us deeply in suffering. - Romans 8:35, 37</p>
<p>God shows up in our weakness. - 2 Corinthians 12: 10</p>	<p>We can choose to trust God. - Habakkuk 3:17-18</p>	<p>We can choose not to be bullied by fear. - Isaiah 41:10</p>	<p>We can choose to release our fears to God. - 1 Peter 5:7</p>	<p>Love is the antidote to fear. - 1 John 4:18</p>
<p>We’re made to share one another’s burdens. - Galatians 6:2</p>	<p>We’re called to love those closest to us. - Proverbs 17:17</p>	<p>We’re called to love our neighbors. - John 13:34</p>	<p>We’re called to care for the vulnerable. - Acts 20:35</p>	<p>God is the author of surprising solutions. - Micah 6:4</p>

We also have two short guides that can help you: one is to guide you through writing your own psalm based on Scripture, and the other guide is on how to prayerfully (a method called *lectio divina*) read Scripture together. Visit reopeningthechurch.com to access these resources and more.

Common Theological Questions About Reopening

The way you think about transitioning back to being part of the in-person ministry of your church during COVID-19 should be built on a strong theological foundation. Sometimes in crisis we've found that people don't connect the dots between their theology and how they're responding to a humanitarian disaster. We encourage you to draw on your church's theological foundation for grappling with issues like fear, adversity, and serving others to guide you in your decision of going back to church, the best way to do so, and how you can be a faithful member of Christ's family in the months ahead.

Is not going back to church acting out of fear instead of faith?

No. It is not acting out of fear to use the knowledge God has given us through science to be wise in caring for ourselves and others. As Proverbs 22:3 says, "The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty." As churches are taking risks into account and making decisions to proceed safely, you can faithfully do the same for your unique situation.

If I wear a mask, am I acting out of fear instead of faith?

No. Where it is recommended for public health, we are rightly asked to wear masks. The masks most of us are wearing aren't to protect ourselves, but to protect others. By wearing masks, we show love to those around us. We recommend following what the CDC and state and local health officials recommend for your area.

Is it rude to ask people to wear masks to church?

No. If masks are recommended by health officials in your area, then doing so is a way to demonstrate our "love of neighbor as ourselves" (Mark 12:31)—both our neighbors in our church as well as in our community. It can be fair and good to ask people in a church to love each other by wearing a mask. For those uncomfortable with wearing a mask, hopefully you are able to choose another option, such as online worship, until it is safe and recommended to gather without masks.

Should we stay united in Christ even when we disagree?

Yes. Remember that not everyone in your church or community will agree and see the reopening process the same way. The complexities and tensions surrounding decisions about possibly attending in-person services in the time of COVID-19 is challenging for many churchgoers. This tension can lead to and has led to division in some churches. Regardless of where you stand on the issue, it's important to remember that all people—including people you disagree with—are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and that we are to care as Christ cared (John 15:12). More than ever, each person needs to recall the wisdom of Micah 6:8, "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God." For it is through this command for humility that God often shows us a better way forward.

Prayer: God, help us to use the Word you've given us to make wise decisions.

Chapter 4. How to Understand Your Risks Using Science

“Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise” (Ephesians 5:15). God gives us the ability to assess our situation and choose to live wisely. We can show faith and also caution for ourselves and for others as we make the decision to return to in-person gatherings.

As you decide about returning to in-person gatherings, you also need to use scientific knowledge about this virus, how it spreads, and who’s at risk. In Micah 6:8 we are called to “walk humbly with God,” the need for which we may feel even more acutely in vulnerable, uncertain times like we’re facing now. This humility should lead you to keep being guided by the best available science to protect yourself, your church, and your community. As you keep learning from people whom God has gifted to engage in rigorous science, you will be in a better position to understand your risks and make a decision.

Be Informed About Latest COVID-19 Risks and Scientific Findings

Staying informed by following updates disseminated by local, state, and federal authorities and public health agencies is key to assessing risk. Seek out and listen to trusted sources that have been monitoring COVID-19 and issuing updated information, resources, and recommendations. Also be sure to keep informed from week to week about what is known about COVID-19 scientifically from trusted and vetted sources. Though not meant to serve as an exhaustive list, here are a few places you might consider looking for information:

- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#)
- [Johns Hopkins University CSSSE Interactive Web-Based COVID-19 Dashboard](#)
- [Reopening The Church](#) (an online resource website from the Humanitarian Disaster Institute and National Association of Evangelicals)

There is a rapidly expanding body of scientific knowledge about COVID-19¹. Experts agree that COVID-19 will be in the US for the foreseeable future, with fluctuating levels of infection in the community. Until a vaccine is available, the virus and the disease will be a threat to our public health. Some of these recent insights (as of the beginning of June) are particularly relevant to you as you consider when and how to resume attending in-person ministries:

- COVID-19 can be transmitted before a person develops symptoms. This explains why the virus spreads so easily and stealthily, greatly complicating efforts to contain its spread.²
- Not every infected person will infect another person. Factors that impact transmission include: infectiousness of the COVID-19 carrier, actions that increase the release of respiratory droplets and aerosols into the surrounding air, proximity to an infected person

¹CDC (2020,). Communities, schools, workplaces, and events: Guidance for where you live, work, learn, pray, and play (COVID-19). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/index.html>

²CDC (2020, Last reviewed May 22). How COVID-19 Spreads. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-covid-spreads.html>

(within six feet is considered high risk), time spent in an enclosed environment with limited ventilation to the outside, amount of time spent with an infected person, and type of social network (e.g., intergenerational). In settings where a greater number of these factors are present, the risk of transmission will be higher.⁴

- Because older people are more susceptible⁵ to contracting COVID-19 and children are less likely to display symptoms, intergenerational contact should be minimized to reduce COVID-19 transmission. It is important to note that children who have been infected have developed complications⁶ from COVID-19, so we must remain diligent to reduce exposure to children as well.
- Younger adults with common chronic conditions like hypertension, diabetes, and autoimmune disease also have an increased risk of serious complications. For the months of April and May, more than half of all COVID-19 hospital admissions in the US are for those under 65 years old.⁷
- As of June 1, many states are starting to lift stay-at-home orders, even though their COVID-19 case counts remain high or have just started to decline. This could lead to an increase in transmission and new cases as individuals begin to resume activities which could increase their exposure. This increase can be mitigated by extensive testing, effective contact tracing, and quarantining of contacts. COVID-19 can spread from one state to another. As long as one part of the country has a poorly controlled epidemic, states that have significantly reduced their cases will remain vulnerable to COVID-19 spread from those areas. The same can be said of spread from one country to another.

Remember that if you are uncomfortable with the possible risks, you can continue to attend virtual gatherings. Moreover, if you fall into the high risk category, you should plan on continuing to attend virtual gatherings. If you don't understand the plans in place, ask for clarification or humbly share with your church why you decided not to attend in person at this time.

As you consider your risk levels, you should also be thinking about risk levels for others. If you think they might be unknowingly taking risks with their safety, it is important to lovingly, patiently, and humbly share your concerns with them. You can pray for them. You can share with them expert advice, like this guide or another resource to help them make their own decision. And you can respect that they may not follow your advice.

Prayer: God, we ask for wise caution as we seek to understand the risks for self and others, and make decisions that show honor to you and love to our neighbor.

⁴CDC (2020, Last reviewed April 24). How to Protect Yourself and Others (COVID-19). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html>

⁵CDC (2020, Last reviewed May 14). People Who Are at Higher Risk for Severe Illness. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-at-higher-risk.html>

⁶CDC (2020, Last reviewed May 20). For Parents: Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C) associated with COVID-19. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/children/mis-c.html>

⁷COVID-NET: COVID-19-Associated Hospitalization Surveillance Network, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. WEBSITE. Accessed on June 1, 2020. https://gis.cdc.gov/grasp/COVIDNet/COVID19_5.html

Chapter 5. How to Know If Your Church Is Reopening Well

“Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it?” (Luke 14:28) In Scripture, we can see God call for wise and careful planning. It is evident in Genesis as Joseph planned for the famine, and it is clear in this verse from Luke. Your church leaders are sitting down and counting the cost of reopening before it happens. You can do the same as you make the decision on when to return.

As your church reopens, don’t expect to go right back to how things had been before COVID-19.

Reopening requires careful planning as well as intentional and effective communication with every person in the congregation. Volunteers need to be recruited and trained. Resources need to be purchased (such as touch-free sanitizing stations).

For example, before COVID-19, many Christians didn’t give much thought to how passing a plate with bread or small juice glasses down the aisles could spread germs. Today we have to consider this. A church that is approaching the reopening process wisely will have thought through such issues, put plans into place, and communicated changes to church members.

These four questions (which we wrote for our [Guide to Reopening Church Services](#)) will help you understand how your church leadership team may be preparing for the reopening:

1. Is our church family and local community ready for us to reopen?
2. Are our staff and volunteers adequately trained for reopening?
3. Is our facility ready to meet all health and safety requirements?
4. Are we able to monitor and adapt to changing needs or requirements?

Another way you can assess how well your church is responding is to compare the suggested safety actions in the table on the next page to safety actions your church is implementing.⁸ Though comparing how your church is responding to the list below may in some instances be like comparing “apples to oranges,” doing so will still give you a general sense of how comprehensively your church is responding.

Factor facilitating transmission	Transmission risk in church activities	Suggested safety actions
Infectiousness of COVID-19 patient	An asymptomatic COVID-19 carrier participating could transmit the virus, but a symptomatic carrier is more infectious	Screen those with symptoms; use face masks (surgical masks or cloth masks, as appropriate)
Actions producing more respiratory droplets	Singing, laughing, talking (especially loudly), coughing, and physical activities that increase deep and rapid breathing	Use face mask when singing or talking, minimize unnecessary physical activities
Close proximity (<6 feet)	People sitting closer than 6 feet apart or facing each other	Maintain physical distancing of at least 6 feet; no face-to-face activity; sit in rows facing one direction; use face masks on all persons in close proximity (Note: Families who reside in one household can remain in close proximity to each other.)
Enclosed space with limited outside ventilation	Meeting frequently in smaller rooms, with low ceilings and no outside ventilation	Use larger rooms with high ceilings; open windows and doors; allow time to vent rooms and sanitize between use; meet outdoors; use face masks
Duration of contact	Meeting for longer than 30 minutes (definition of close contact); longer duration equals more risk	Minimize time by cutting non-essential activities; uni-directional flow for foot traffic; prompt and orderly entry and exit maintaining appropriate distances from one another
Increased social mixing	Gatherings including asymptomatic younger people with older people	Keep participants segregated by age groups; same people meeting regularly together reduces mixing

Remember, this is not a fully comprehensive list of all possible risk factors or safety actions. These are not suggested to replace your church's plans, but rather are provided as examples of things you might choose to do in addition to the guidance your church might provide. If you have any concerns, remember your church is likely working hard on these issues and may yet need to make a final decision before communicating about it. If you continue to be concerned as they share details of how reopening will happen, you can consult our detailed [Guide to Reopening Church Services](#).

Prayer: God, help us to both trust our leaders and encourage them to make decisions that are wise for the whole congregation.

⁸This table is adapted from Annan, K., Aten, J., & Louissaint, N. (2020). Guide to reopening church services: A step-by-step, Biblical-based approach to resuming in-person ministries. Wheaton, IL: Humanitarian Disaster Institute and is originally based on When Your Church Reopens, Here's How to Meet Safely, Chin, D. (2020, May 6), Christianity Today. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/may-web-only/when-churches-reopen-phase-coronavirus-covid-19-guidelines.html>

Chapter 6. How to Return with Practical Wisdom

“For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1:7). While we are not called to be timid, the Spirit gives us power, love, and self-discipline. As you discern, remember you have the power to make a decision, the ability to love your neighbor in that decision, and the self-discipline to make sacrifices in light of that love.

Communicate well. Ensure you’re carefully reading church communications. If you have concerns, share those kindly with the leaders (Micah 6:8). Encourage your leaders during this time as well.

Show patience and humility. Reopening is complex, and the church has to consider many factors and take on many new tasks. Patience is one of the fruits of the spirit (Galatians 5:22) that we all need a lot of these days. We should also be humble, understanding that none of us completely understand the nature of COVID-19 and others will likely have very different perspectives than our own. Don’t compromise safety, but be patient and humble.

Grow in spiritual maturity. The COVID-19 pandemic is a time when we can grow in spiritual maturity, by God’s grace (James 1:2-4). For example, you may not like the way communion is done in your church during this time of transition. You can lament the changes, but also graciously recognize they are necessary to prevent compromising the safety of the vulnerable members of our congregation.

Value the unity of Christ and see the perspective of others. Some in your church will have very similar ideas to you about the reopening process. Others will likely feel very differently, while others are unsure quite what to think. As the passage from 1 Corinthians at the start of the guide says of Christ’s body, “that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.” Find how you can help to nurture unity during the stages of reopening and remember those who are suffering among you.

Be witnesses for Christ. As we walk through this process of reopening, the way we do so is also an opportunity to let Christ’s love and grace shine through our lives to each other and to our community (Matthew 5:14-16).

Checklist for Church Members Returning to In-Person Services

Once you have decided to return to church, continue to keep the framework above in mind. Below are a series of steps to consider taking on the actual day you return to an in-person church service. Think through and anticipate what it might look like to implement each step. Mentally visualizing and rehearsing what it might be like will help you be better prepared for safely reentering your church again. This isn’t an exhaustive list but can help you plan for your (wise and joyful!) return to church.

✓ Checklist for Church Members	
At Home	
	Pray for your church, leadership, and yourself.
	Check your phone, email, and church website and social media for important notifications and information before and after attending an in-person service.
	Review any recent church communications on reopening policies and procedures.
	Make sure you have a clean mask (and know how to properly wear it), and have sanitizer with you before leaving for an in-person church service.
	Wash your hands before leaving and after returning home from church (remember if your mask needs to be washed after wearing it to church).
Assess Your Health	
	Stay home if you are showing possible signs or symptoms of illness (e.g., fever), have recently been sick, or if others you are staying with are or were recently showing signs or symptoms.
	Stay home if you or others you are staying with may have recently been exposed to someone suspected or diagnosed with COVID-19.
	If you or others you are staying with start to show signs or symptoms of COVID-19 after attending an in-person church service, consult a healthcare professional and notify your church leadership.
In Church Parking Lot	
	Mentally prepare and ready yourself for social distancing.
	Remember you and others will likely be excited to be together again and that you will need to be intentional in order to observe safety actions.
	Put on your mask and check in the vehicle's mirror to make sure your mask is properly secured.
	Use hand sanitizer before exiting your vehicle and again after the service before you head home.
	Observe social distancing recommendations even while exiting and entering your vehicle, making sure to give space to others as they are exiting or entering their vehicles.
	Be sure to maintain recommended distancing with others as you walk through the parking lot or sidewalk to the church building and when returning to your vehicle.
In Church Entryway and Hallways	
	Be alert to instructions from church leaders and volunteers providing guidance.
	Look and listen for COVID-19-related instructions and resources (e.g., announcements, posters).
	Don't break social distancing recommendations when entering or exiting doorways, waiting spaces (e.g., welcome center, lobby), or restrooms.
	Be sure to wash your hands if entering a restroom for at least 20 seconds with lathered soap.

	Remember to be patient and gracious with others.
In Worship Area	
	Follow the instructions, procedures, and policies your church is implementing (such as changes in seating arrangements, communion, choir, worship, etc.).
	Remember to stay at least six feet apart from others with whom you have not been staying, both during the service and when interacting.
	Remember that many healthcare professionals, scientists, and choir organizations consider singing and choirs a high risk activity.
	We encourage you to properly wear a mask not only to reduce the risk of catching COVID-19 but to also reduce the risk of spreading the virus.
	Avoid touching your eyes, nose, mouth, face, and mask (unless to adjust).
	Avoid “high touch” activities (e.g., greeting with a handshake, passing a collection plate from person to person).

Prayer: God, while we excitedly gather together again, help us limit the spread by remembering to follow the new precautions put into place.

Chapter 7. How to Love Your Neighbor While Churches Reopen

“Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God’... ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matt. 22:37-39). During this pandemic, one way you express love for yourself is in doing what you can to avoid getting infected. In the same way, one way you express love for your neighbors is by doing what you can to protect them from infection. The Christian faith simply does not support putting self above others. When asked by an expert in the law to name the greatest commandment, Jesus offered this indivisible twofold response. As a Christian deciding when and how to reenter your church doors, love for your vulnerable neighbors can guide you.

It is important to love our neighbor—both in our congregation and community—during this time. Efforts must be made to protect both ourselves and our community, especially those most vulnerable (you can check [this CDC site](#) about people in vulnerable health categories that is also mentioned in an earlier chapter). As Christians, we are committed to practicing the love of God and love of neighbor.

Treat People as the Experts of Their Own Needs

Humility helps us recognize that each of us has a lot to learn about the best way to help others. If we do not listen and take what people say seriously, we will not offer help that truly addresses their needs.

- Treat people as the experts of their own needs.
- Remember that the people you are helping know their own needs better than you do.
- Do not assume you know what others are experiencing or what they need.
- Remember that helpers who think they need to be perfect are more likely to cause harm.
- Be sure your love is an action that respects others as children of God, not as “a project.”
- Reflect on how you might deliberately listen to people who will be impacted by your decisions and how you might show respect to others who may disagree with you.
- Remind yourself that each person you interact with has something to teach you.

We can care physically for our neighbors. Because some people carrying the virus will be asymptomatic, we may be unknowingly putting others at risk. To love well, we wear masks and keep distance so that we don’t unknowingly spread the virus to others. As we individually make the decision about when and how to return to church, we do so in a way that is not just safe for us individually but for others, as well.

We can care emotionally for our neighbors. During these difficult days, we can encourage one another and also share with others our persistent hope for the future. Now more than ever is the time for you to love your neighbor. Call an older adult who is isolated and lonely. Support

a friend who was recently laid off and ask how they are doing. Participate in God's provision by volunteering at a local food bank or another missional opportunity in your community. There are many ways to encourage those around you.

We can care spiritually for our neighbors. Being present to provide spiritual support, which can still be done while physically distancing, says more to those suffering than any words we might say. During the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the best ways you can encourage others' faith and overall well-being is to show up for them virtually. What people need now is to know they aren't forgotten, but cared for and loved by you and—most of all—by God.

How to Care for the Whole Person

Focus on meeting immediate practical needs of others through a safe and supportive presence, even if virtually or from a distance, in order to facilitate holistic health by:

- Praying for others while also taking action to help.
- Focusing on being present by pushing aside internal and external distractions.
- Conveying genuine concern and warmth to the person you are helping.
- Remembering that each person you encounter is unique and valuable.
- Offering compassion, not just the appearance of compassion.
- Discussing common stress reactions and struggles (e.g., feeling anxious, sad, fearful).
- Acknowledging the difficulty of the situation and what they are going through.
- Letting people know when they are having a normal reaction to an abnormal situation and that it's okay to struggle.
- Looking for strengths in the person you are helping.
- Providing spiritual and social support.
- Encouraging spiritual coping.
- Helping facilitate lament.
- Referring if someone needs additional professional assistance or reporting to proper authorities if a possible threat to self or others.
- Connecting the person to faith-based, community, and healthcare resources.

If you would like more resources on how to care for yourself and others during this time, download our free [Spiritual First Aid Manual](#) or visit our website spiritualfirstaidhub.com for additional free resources like tip sheets, a children's book, online classes, and more.

Prayer: God, help us to continue to grow in our love for you and love for others.

Chapter 8. How to Care for Yourself Faithfully

“But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:16). During this time of heightened uncertainty and stress, it’s important to remember to take care of yourself. Jesus modeled this in his life. And also remember that we don’t take care of ourselves alone. As Isaiah 41:10 says, “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

In times like this, we need to remember that self-care is important and keeps us healthy. Our bodies are the “temples of the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:19) and taking care of ourselves is one of the ways we can practice good stewardship. Practicing self-care will also help you serve and help others for the long-term. Following are some self-care practices to help you manage COVID-19 related stress associated with reopening decisions.

Pay attention to your body and your emotions.

It’s natural to experience stress and anxiety in the face of a threat we cannot control. Because every person reacts differently, notice what your body and emotions are telling you:

- Listen to your emotions, noticing any anxiety, sadness, anger, or detachment.
- Listen to your body, noticing any change in appetite, new aches and pains, or feeling particularly hot or cool.
- When you notice troubling symptoms, pause to care for your body and mind.

If you become unable to manage or function well, seek the assistance of a professional such as a licensed mental-health professional or healthcare provider. Signs that you may need additional support include:

- Your stress symptoms seem really intense.
- Your stress seems like it just won’t go away.
- Your stress starts to interfere with everyday life.
- Your behaviors are becoming more impulsive and risky.
- You are self-medicating with alcohol or drugs to cope with stress.
- You are thinking of hurting yourself or someone else.

If you believe you are becoming a possible threat to yourself or someone else, call 911 or proper authorities immediately for help.

Helpful Coping Strategies

Here are some general coping strategies you can use to help address emotional struggles and stress caused by COVID-19:

- **Pray.** Prayer is essential in all our responses and is our direct line to God.
- **Read Scripture.** Scripture keeps us grounded in truth and keeps our worries in check.
- **Breathe.** Inhale and exhale slowly and deeply.
- **Talk.** Share your feelings with someone you trust when you feel ready.
- **Imagine.** Envision a stop sign to halt painful thoughts.
- **Entertainment.** Let yourself laugh or learn.
- **Walk.** Engage in regular exercise of some kind (if able).
- **Grieve.** Release the emotions holding you down.
- **Music.** Listen to or sing a soothing song.
- **Journal.** Don't avoid facing your experience and pain.
- **Connect.** Find others' inspiring stories.
- **Rest.** Give your body permission to recover.

Embrace best health practices.

Though there's much about the COVID-19 outbreak over which you have no control, you can choose to embrace the kinds of practices that will keep you and your loved ones safe. The Center for Disease Control suggests:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Stay home when you are sick.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces using a regular household cleaning spray or wipe.
- Follow recommendations for using a facemask.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.

While it may feel like there is a lot you can't control amidst concerns over COVID-19, you can still make proactive and positive choices to care for yourself.

Prayer: God, thank you for caring for us and knowing our needs, and help us to remember to care for ourselves as well as for others.

Benediction

“The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace” (Numbers 6:24-26). This well-known blessing in the Bible is often used to end worship services and to send people into another week of loving God and their neighbors. We pray this booklet will bless you as you use it to bless others by making wise decisions during such a time as this.

The COVID-19 pandemic in its present form will pass. One day you’ll look back on this time and see clearly that God was with you and was working in your midst for good. Knowing this, you can turn to God today and ask for the discernment, compassion, and faith to make the right decisions for yourself, and also your neighbor and your church, at this time.

Finally, although all of us are eager to return to “normal,” Christians are equipped to find meaning in our current circumstances. We are guided to rejoice and find meaning in trials. Through history, our identity has been shaped when circumstances were not as we would have chosen. Today, followers of Jesus can celebrate and participate in the small acts of kindness and love in a world that feels particularly chaotic.

We are the body of Christ, before, during, and after COVID-19. As people who have discovered grace and meaning in Jesus, we can live that out even—and perhaps particularly—in these difficult circumstances, as “the joy of the LORD is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10).

Appendix: Should I Be Attending Worship Services at My Church?

<p style="text-align: center;">①</p> <p style="text-align: center;">What is my health and exposure status?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">②</p> <p style="text-align: center;">How well has my church prepared for a safe reopening?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">③</p> <p style="text-align: center;">What safety measures can I expect to be in place when I go to church for worship?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">④</p> <p style="text-align: center;">What health and safety measures must exist for me to feel safe going to church?</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Am I at a higher risk for COVID-19 infection? <input type="checkbox"/> Am I over age 65? <input type="checkbox"/> Do I have any of the following conditions: diabetes, hypertension, heart or lung disease, compromised immune system? <input type="checkbox"/> Am I under a quarantine or stay-at-home order? <input type="checkbox"/> Do I work in close proximity with a person who has been sick or diagnosed with COVID-19 during the past 14 days? <input type="checkbox"/> Do I currently have a fever or any of the following symptoms: cough, difficulty breathing, sore throat, muscle or chest pain, fatigue, headache, congestion, runny nose, digestive upset? <input type="checkbox"/> Within the past 14 days, have I been sick or diagnosed with COVID-19, or am I sharing a residence with anyone who has been sick or diagnosed with COVID-19? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Is my church reopening according to current state and local orders and recommendations? <input type="checkbox"/> Has our building been disinfected and cleaned, and how frequently will it be disinfected during use? <input type="checkbox"/> Has my church reopening team been trained in social distancing, hygiene practices, health and safety protocols, cleaning and disinfection? <input type="checkbox"/> Has my church explained the new operating process for arrivals, seating, worship practices, exits, and dealing with apparent illness? <input type="checkbox"/> Has my church made in-person or alternate worship options available for children, the elderly, and the disabled? <input type="checkbox"/> Has my church made its full reopening plan available? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Has the church asked people with symptoms or recent exposure to stay home for now? <input type="checkbox"/> Will everyone coming into our church be required to wear a mask? <input type="checkbox"/> Do we have isolation space or a plan for people who appear to be (or become) ill while at church? <input type="checkbox"/> Are social distancing measures clearly marked, explained, and enforced? <input type="checkbox"/> Will masks, tissues, hand sanitizer, and no-touch trash cans be available for use? <input type="checkbox"/> Will there be people to explain, or signs to remind us of, new worship practices and preventive actions? <input type="checkbox"/> Is my church keeping attendance records, and will I be notified if someone in church is diagnosed with COVID-19? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> I am willing to stay home if I am ill or may recently have been exposed to COVID-19. <input type="checkbox"/> I am willing to abide by the preventive measures my church requires. <input type="checkbox"/> I want everyone to be wearing a mask. <input type="checkbox"/> I want social distancing measures to be taken seriously and enforced. <input type="checkbox"/> I want to know that I will be contacted in case of possible COVID-19 exposure at church. <input type="checkbox"/> I want to know who to call if I become ill after attending a worship service. <input type="checkbox"/> I will let my church know if for some reason I am not yet able to return after the church has reopened.
<p style="text-align: center;">If any yes, DO NOT GO.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">If you are not satisfied with preparations, DO NOT GO.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">If you are not satisfied with conditions, DO NOT GO.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">If you are comfortable with measures taken, GO.</p>

About the Humanitarian Disaster Institute

The Humanitarian Disaster Institute was founded in 2011 at Wheaton College and is the country's first faith-based academic disaster research center. Our mission is to help the church prepare and care in a disaster-filled world. HDI carries out our mission through research, training, convening, and resourcing.

About HDI's M.A. Degree and Trauma Certificate

This M.A. in Humanitarian & Disaster Leadership at Wheaton College Graduate School can be completed in one year on campus or two years online (which includes a week of on-campus coursework at the beginning and end of the program). We have also partnered with the School of Psychology, Counseling, and Family Therapy at Wheaton College Graduate School to offer a new Trauma Certificate in a specialized track specifically tailored to humanitarian and disaster responders. Learn more at wheaton.edu/HDL.

Citation

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Sources

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Contact Us

Our website and social media accounts provide ongoing updates and resources for preparing your church for COVID-19. You can also find more information about Spiritual First Aid, including additional tools and related research.

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Disclaimer: The Humanitarian Disaster Institute recognizes that sanctioned religious activity varies from state to state. The suggestions provided in this guide are not meant to serve as, nor is to be used as, legal, medical, or healthcare regulations. Rather the information provided in this guide is meant to serve as a framework to help communities of faith consider some suggestions as they determine how they will independently choose to take action. HDI cannot guarantee the accuracy, timeliness, or completeness of information contained in this manual because of how rapidly information is changing regarding what is known about COVID-19. Similarly, HDI cannot guarantee the accuracy, timeliness, or completeness of information contained in this manual regarding protective measures because of how rapidly recommended best practice guidelines are changing. This guide is not meant to replace federal, state, or local guidelines or recommendations on COVID-19.

