



*Better Together...  
...Moving Together*

# Guidelines for Re-Gathering

## Public Worship

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**R**e-Opening America or Ohio is a hot topic these days. This is signaling that our economic and social organizations were closed for business and can now begin to re-open for business. But the Church is different from an organization. She is a living organism birthed by the Holy Spirit. As we, the Church, look to go back into our facilities of worship, we are not opening up the Church! The Church was NEVER closed! Through these last 2 months there have been so many innovative and creative expressions of worship, discipleship, and service to neighbors and community to remind us that the Church has remained open!

Therefore when our churches resume normal assembly, we will be Re-Gathering! We are Re-Gathering to see the faces of family, friends, loved ones, church staff and leaders. And we are Re-Gathering to be a witness to the peace, salvation and hope of Jesus!

This document is designed to help you and your leadership think through how you can Re-Gather in a way that honors our Lord Jesus and seeks to offer your congregation a reasonably safe worship experience. Included is a general guideline; a sample template that considers key planning points to create safe, healthy worship experiences; and some creative ideas for worship.

Moving Together to Serve our Lord!

Rev. Dr. Esther Cottrell  
State Pastor & Director of Ministries



## Guidelines for Re-Engaging with Public Worship

May 5, 2020

We all recognize both the need and desire to resume public worship gatherings in some form. No doubt, it will bring us joy to resume in-person fellowship and spiritual encouragement when the time and circumstances are right.

For now, online and drive-in services are working very well for many churches and there is no pressing need to quickly abandon those formats and return to public gatherings.

Prudence suggests that the timing and manner in which a church begins to re-engage with public worship services should remain in thoughtful alignment with the guidelines provided by national, state, and local health officials. **Accordingly, this document serves as food for thought and may be updated periodically.**

Three key areas should be considered in relation to how a church should re-engage.

1. First, the church must consider the **guiding principles** which govern the transition.
2. Second, a church must attend to the **protocols and procedures** that will govern the re-entry.
3. Third, a church must consider an appropriate **communication strategy** for enumerating these measures to the congregation.

**Guiding Principles** Guiding principles serve as the lens through which decisions can be made. It is easy in seasons like this one to allow urgency to play a greater role than it should when making good, sound choices. The following are some of the factors that should be considered.

- The Public Witness of the Church
- The Prayerful Wisdom of Your Team of Leaders
- The Particular Needs and Circumstances of Your Local Congregation
- The Plans of Other Churches in the Community and State to Act as One Voice
- The Call of Churches to Lead and Model the Common Good of the Community
- The Guidance of Your Insurance Company and Legal Counsel
- The Latest Recommendations/Orders from the CDC and Governmental Authorities

**Protocols and Procedures** As you look to create a strategy for public worship services, you need to consider several factors when preparing your protocols.

First, you need to review the timeline or phases of the return.

For the sake of this document, we will reference the [Opening Up America Again](#) guidelines provided by the White House as a framework, which recommends houses of worship develop their plans "in accordance with Federal, State, and local regulations and guidance." Ohio's recommendations may be different than Georgia's or Michigan's. As we have all learned, this situation is dynamic. Be sure to consult the latest recommendations from governmental leaders as you build out your church's strategy.



## The White House's current strategy for re-opening is set up in three phases:

- 1) In phase **one**, churches are permitted to operate under strict physical distancing protocols. Additionally, entities like daycares or camps should remain closed. While the current recommendations do not define "strict" clearly, it can be assumed that the strictest of standards should be followed given that individuals are encouraged to avoid participating in groups that are larger than ten individuals without appropriate distancing requirements being met. Additionally, it should be highlighted that vulnerable individuals whose health is at-risk are recommended to shelter-in-place during this phase.
- 2) In phase **two**, the physical distancing requirements are relaxed to moderate. Daycares will be permitted to reopen. Individuals are encouraged to avoid crowds of more than 50 if social distancing is unattainable. Vulnerable populations are encouraged to continue to shelter-in-place during this phase. Daycares and camps can resume in this phase.
- 3) In phase **three**, public gatherings can operate with only limited distancing guidelines. There is no crowd size defined in this phase. However, individuals are encouraged to avoid large crowds if possible. Those who are vulnerable are allowed to resume normal activities while taking normal precautions.

Additionally, just as protocols and procedures will look differently from one state to the next and from one community to the next, so they will need to look differently from one church to the next. A church with hundreds of people in each service will most certainly need to take a different approach than a church with less than 50.

Some churches are already planning to resume public services weeks or even months later than others. Realizing there is no "one-size fits all" fix for re-entry, a generalized template is provided below. Each local team of leaders should prayerfully consider the approach that seems best suited for their congregation and their community.

**Communication Strategy** With your team of leaders, outline a strategy for how your church will communicate your upcoming plans. Keep in mind the following perspectives:

- Carefully consider whatever you post on social media since it will need to be viewed through the lens of what the watching world will see. The unchurched may not readily understand your enthusiasm for reconvening in group settings.
- Guidelines and recommendations are being updated continually. It will be important for your people to be fully informed of your church's plans and protocols via email, website, and phone calls.
- Some in your church will be thrilled to meet again, as soon as possible. Others will feel that a "wait and see" approach is more fitting. Choose your words as carefully as possible when conveying your plans.
- As sensitively as possible, help families with young children, senior citizens, those who are at risk, etc., to understand why others in your congregation will reasonably have concerns about their attendance. For example, some adults will be disappointed and concerned if other young children violate social distancing protocols in church.



## *Sample Template for Re-Gathering*

### **Initial Phase:**

Smaller Gathering for Leaders (or Invitees)

**Possible Marker?** After Stay at Home orders are lifted per Phase 1 White House/state guidelines

### **Intermediary Phase:**

Staggered gatherings in sanctuary or appropriate room, still referencing Phase 1 White House/state guidelines

**Possible Marker?** After Initial Phase services are running smoothly

### **Children's Phase:**

As per Phase 2 White House/state guidelines

**Possible Marker?** After Ohio Approves Daycares to Open

### **Final Phase/Standard Services:**

As per Phase 3 White House/state guidelines

**Possible Marker?** When Ohio Lifts Restrictions on Large Group Gatherings

## Initial Phase: Smaller Gathering for Leaders (or Invitees)

**Possible Marker?** After Stay at Home orders are lifted per Phase 1 White House/state guidelines

### A. Before first weekend of service(s)

1. Check with church's insurer, latest from governor, etc.
2. Develop tentative re-entry schedule with team of leaders.
3. Questions: What is legal? What is recommended? What is tasteful?
4. Keep facility sanitized as per CDC [Disinfecting Facility](#) guidelines
5. Communicate preparations and expectations via Facebook, website, video, and email
  - a. Nursery, children and youth ministries are not yet operational during services
  - b. Church is disinfecting facilities and surfaces regularly
  - c. Encourage CDC recommendations (wear masks, wash hands, social distancing, etc.)
  - d. Advertise adjustments below
  - e. Insist vulnerable individuals whose health is at-risk to stay home
  - f. Continue online/alternate worship experience options
6. Post signage of protocols outside and inside
7. If possible, establish one-way traffic flow signage and patterns to avoid two-way traffic in a single doorway or corridor.

### B. Sunday morning before service

1. Sanitation Teams begin wiping bathrooms, door handles, high traffic surfaces, etc. every 15 minutes
2. Greeters are present while standing 6-10 feet from doors
3. Prop open or hold open all doors to limit touching door handles
4. Coffee stations and cafes should remain closed at all times
5. Supply of hand sanitizer and masks on way in, if available
6. Signs on nursery and kids ministry areas with those doors locked
7. Remove or rope off 50% or more of seating or sit in every 3rd pew
8. Ushers maintain distance while guiding people to seats
9. Live streaming to other room(s) as needed

### C. During service

1. No youth or children's classes; (children stay with family)
2. Do not direct people to shake hands, hug, etc., as you might normally do
3. Only family/household units may sit together
4. Announce and observe latest social distancing protocols
5. Platform participants model social distancing while avoiding sharing mics, instruments, stands, etc.
6. Service length should be shorter than normal (60 minutes or less)
7. Minimize need for restrooms; sanitize after each use
8. Consider emphasis on group experience such as prayer and worship
9. No offering plates passed; reference online giving or provide stationary open drop boxes (without lids/handles that require contact)
10. Utilize screens or apps instead of passing around hard copy bulletins and connection cards
11. Pre-packaged communion elements served by ushers wearing masks and gloves
12. Prayer for needs in a general sense (no laying on of hands or holding hands, etc.)

### D. After service

1. Structured dismissals (by rows or sections?) allowing people to leave in smaller groups and go outside (no congregating in lobby)
2. Consider positioning video camera outside to later post and share uplifting stories on church's Facebook page or website.

## Intermediary Phase:

Staggered gatherings in sanctuary or appropriate room, still referencing Phase 1 White House/state guidelines

**Possible Marker?** After Initial Phase services are running smoothly

- A. Continue Initial Phase protocols above, possibly modified as appropriate
- B. Example: One service for Households A–M; another for Households N–Z
- C. Alternate every other Sunday, or use this season to launch second (or additional) service
- D. More groups needed for larger churches; Example: A–G, H–M, N–T, U–Z
- E. Allow extra time for sanitizing between services
- F. Still no youth, children, small groups, etc.; no nursery
- G. Consider alternative service/location for healthy individuals age 65 and older

## Children's Phase:

As per Phase 2 White House/state guidelines

**Possible Marker?** After Ohio Approves Daycares to Open

- A. Observe Initial and Intermediary Phase protocols above, possibly modified as appropriate
- B. Use [Childcare Guidance Recommendations](#) from CDC to consider whether it is time to resume nursery services and children's classes;
- C. Other small groups and in-person ministries resume based on comfort level of leaders, pastor/board approval
- D. Consider alternative service/location for those who may be at greater risk

## Final Phase/Standard Services:

As per Phase 3 White House/state guidelines

**Possible Marker?** When Ohio Lifts Restrictions on Large Group Gatherings

- A. Service schedules cautiously return to normal
- B. Maintain helpful protocols above as appropriate
- C. Observe updated CDC, federal, and state guidelines as warranted
- D. Maintain readiness to return to prior phases as warranted

## Your First Weeks



The first few Sundays will be exciting and filled with uncertainty. We are fully aware that many of you have begun to plan how to Re-Gather. Some may want to belatedly observe Palm Sunday, Easter and maybe Mother's Day. And perhaps some of you will decide to Re-Gather on May 31st to celebrate "Pentecost"!

There are many examples in the Bible and Church History where our leaders of the past "mark" or "observed" their victories and losses prior to moving on! Below are some suggestions we offer you and your congregations to help you mark these first Sundays with purpose and meaning:

**D**ay of Remembrance - Design a service or dedicate a portion of your service to remembering those loved ones and family and friends who died during our time of separation. Many in the congregation have not been afforded opportunity to grieve their losses in the midst of the People of God. This service will help everyone to pause and honor those who have passed.

**D**ay of Celebration - Over these last months, many special occasions have been missed: birthdays, graduations, work-related accomplishments, weddings, anniversaries, etc. These special days and accomplishments should be observed and celebrated. Be creative and respect the rules of not violating someone's bubble (space) if they aren't wearing gloves and mask. Remember we have to change our old behaviors, so the normal Cake and Ice Cream or Punch Reception must be well thought out!

**D**ay of Thanksgiving - Everyone who enters the doors of the Church are Victors. Through changed behaviors and practices or the grace of God, they are alive! As with in the Old Testament and practiced today among the Jewish Culture, we have experienced **Passed Over**. This event must never be forgotten! Design a service of being both thankful and grateful for the mercies of God upon each person who gathers at the church. Though we mourn the lost, we have been spared! Celebrate!

**D**ay of Service - The majority of us who were not able to be present in our places of worship, had to abandon those communities! Our empty buildings and those who make up your assembly were MIA or missing in action when it came to ministering in your community among your neighbors. Many of your neighbors missed your acts of kindness and the services you offered them. What better way to show that you are a community church than to use a Sunday to Love On Your Neighbors? In the past, many churches have dedicated a Sunday services to doing services projects. We encourage you to show your relevancy to your community with a day dedicated to be the Hands and Feet of Jesus, serving as a testimony of hope and glorifying your heavenly Father!



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## Questions about COVID-19?

[Coronavirus.ohio.gov](https://coronavirus.ohio.gov)

April 14, 2020 | ODH

Coronavirus.ohio.gov is the State of Ohio's source for updated, accurate information to help you prepare for and protect against coronavirus disease 2019, COVID-19 .

Ohio Department of Health call center is ready to answer your questions about COVID-19

[1-833-4-ASK-ODH \(1-833-427-5634\)](tel:18334ASKODH)

[Staffed from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. each day](#)

If you have questions about how to protect yourself and prepare for COVID-19 in your community, the Ohio Department of Health (ODH) can provide answers.

The ODH coronavirus disease 2019 call center can be reached at 1-833-4-ASK-ODH. ODH staffers operate the center seven days a week from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily, including weekends.

Call center staff includes licensed nurses and infectious disease experts. They are available to answer questions and provide accurate information about COVID-19, the risk to the public, and the state's response.

Remember that the best thing you can do in the face of COVID-19 is to take precautions to protect yourself, your family, and your community:

- ⇒ Wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds; dry hands with a clean towel or air dry hands.
- ⇒ Use alcohol-based hand sanitizer when soap and water are unavailable.
- ⇒ Cover your mouth with a tissue or sleeve when sneezing or coughing.
- ⇒ Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands.
- ⇒ Stay home when you are sick.
- ⇒ Avoid contact with people who are sick.
- ⇒ Clean “high-touch” surfaces daily. These include counters, tabletops, doorknobs, light switches, bathroom fixtures, toilets, phones, keyboards, desks, and tablets.

Find additional information at [coronavirus.ohio.gov](https://coronavirus.ohio.gov).

## *Additional Resources*

- **Responsible Restart Ohio**  
<https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/covid-19/responsible-restart-ohio>
- **Opening Up America Again, three-phased government guidelines**  
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica>
- **24 Questions Your Church Should Answer Before People Return, by Ken Braddy**  
<https://kenbraddy.com/2020/04/18/20>
- **Ed Stetzer re: Relaunching the Church**  
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2020/april/what-relaunching-church-might-look-like-over-next-312-month.html>  
  
[https://www.dropbox.com/s/0lasj6w6dg0x7i9/Relaunching%20the%20Church-Final%20Edit%20%28JL%29.pptx?dl=0&fbclid=IwAR3-cdMB92By0o70\\_MWjb0Kph7DzaUPWCgcWOi71wb0x-Ve269MGvOtlrM](https://www.dropbox.com/s/0lasj6w6dg0x7i9/Relaunching%20the%20Church-Final%20Edit%20%28JL%29.pptx?dl=0&fbclid=IwAR3-cdMB92By0o70_MWjb0Kph7DzaUPWCgcWOi71wb0x-Ve269MGvOtlrM)
- **Pastor, Physician: Welcome Public To Coronavirus Conversations:** Jes Smith is a doctor based in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Josh Deeter serves as senior pastor for First Church of God in Tallmadge, Ohio.  
<https://www.jesusisthesubject.org/pastor-physician-welcome-public-to-coronavirus-conversations/>
- **Brotherhood Mutual Resources**  
<https://www.brotherhoodmutual.com/resources/safety-library/risk-management-articles/disasters-emergencies-and-health/general-health-and-injury-prevention/coronavirus-reopen-clean/>  
  
<https://www.brotherhoodmutual.com/resources/safety-library/risk-management-articles/disasters-emergencies-and-health/general-health-and-injury-prevention/coronavirus-reopening-facility-prep/>  
  
<https://www.brotherhoodmutual.com/resources/safety-library/risk-management-articles/disasters-emergencies-and-health/general-health-and-injury-prevention/coronavirus-infectious-disease-plan/>

### **Links Included in this document:**

Page 3—Opening up America again  
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/>

page 6—Disinfecting Facility  
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>

page 7—Childcare Guidance Recommendations  
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/guidance-for-childcare.html>

page 9—Ohio Department of Health  
<https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/covid-19/home>



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