

SOME SUGGESTIONS ABOUT GATHERING AGAIN
from American Baptist Churches of New York State
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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This resource seeks to spawn a thoughtful and responsible approach as your congregation considers how they will begin reconvening in-person gatherings and meetings when the time is appropriate. It does not presume to offer medical or legal advice. Congregational leaders should consult with local authorities, staying up to date with the latest guidance from public health and government officials.

WHY AM I RECEIVING THIS?

How Do Baptists Work? As Region staff have been having conversations with church leaders over the period of the “New York Pause”—in other words, our quarantine—we have sensed among our churches concern for the welfare of their congregants and the health of their communities. Our leaders are being good shepherds of the flock God has given into their care, and they are honoring the call of Jeremiah to “seek the welfare of the city” (29:7).

Unlike denominations with a centralized power structure, American Baptists leave the ordering of church life to local congregations. We believe local leaders are in the best position to discern the will of God for their congregation. With this freedom, however, comes responsibility. We wish to provide some questions that might assist you as you responsibly and faithfully exercise your prerogative.

Why is this So Long? You may look at this document and find its length off putting. We need to set the Covid19 pandemic in perspective. During the war in Vietnam 58,209 Americans died, 4,117 of them being New Yorkers. As of June 2nd, Covid19 has claimed the lives of 107,414 Americans, 29,988 of them New Yorkers. What we do in the midst of this crisis matters.

Where Do Churches Lie on the Continuum of Risk? Are churches being singled out unfairly? Churches are generally classified along with sports stadiums, concert halls, movie theatres, and *other venues where a group of people from many different homes come together and spend several hours in proximity to one another*. Covid19 is primarily, but not exclusively, an airborne virus; it remains in the air for 2 to 3 hours. The additional risk of corporate singing is obvious. We can appreciate why a church gathering would be a higher risk activity than a group people in a large warehouse store for 20 minutes, not speaking to one another. This classification of churches is not the result of *equating the value of worship services* with going to see the Buffalo Bills score touchdowns. Rather, it is because of the *nature* of our religious gatherings. Churches and funerals have in some cases spawned the spread of the virus.

Some churches disagree with this classification. They wish to be categorized as the “essential” service that they are and to be treated so by State and Federal governments when it comes to gatherings. A church’s position on this question will certainly affect their schedule of return to in-person gatherings.

The CDC provides the following introduction in their “Interim Guidelines for Communities of Faith:”

Millions of Americans embrace worship as an essential part of life. For many faith traditions, gathering together for worship is at the heart of what it means to be a community of faith. But as Americans are now aware, gatherings present a risk for increasing spread of COVID-19 during this Public Health Emergency. The CDC offers these suggestions for faith communities to consider and accept, reject, or modify, consistent with their own faith traditions, in the course of preparing to reconvene for in-person gatherings while still working to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

This guidance is not intended to infringe on rights protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution or any other federal law, including the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 (RFRA). The federal government may not prescribe standards for interactions of faith communities in houses of worship and, in accordance with the First Amendment, no faith community should be asked to adopt any mitigation strategies that are more stringent than the mitigation strategies asked of similarly situated entities or activities.

In addition, we note that while many types of gatherings are important for civic and economic well-being, religious worship has particularly profound significance to communities and individuals, including as a right protected by the First Amendment. State and local authorities are reminded to take this vital right into account when establishing their own re-opening plans.

The CDC recognizes the value of religious communities and their worship and affirms their constitutional rights under the First Amendment.

US Supreme Court Decision: On Friday May 29th, The Supreme Court rejected a California church's attempt to overturn the state's coronavirus restrictions on in-person religious services. In a 5-4 decision the court upheld the state's right to impose limits on congregations in order to slow the spread of Covid19. The court wrote: “Although California’s guidelines place restrictions on places of worship, those restrictions appear consistent with the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment,”

How Do We Frame the Question? We would like, first of all, to discard the question: “When do we reopen our church?” Our churches have been “open.” Congregations have been worshipping and having Bible studies together online. Pastors and deacons are finding creative ways to care for others and keep track of the faithful. Congregations have seen new needs in their communities and have found constructive ways to address these opportunities for ministry. Our churches have not been “closed.” No virus has the power to shut down the movement of the Holy Spirit among us and in our State.

A better question is: “How will we decide when it is prudent to begin meeting in person again and what process will we follow as we move back toward in-person gatherings—be they worship, board meetings, or Bible studies, etc.?” Realize that you cannot eliminate all risk; you can only manage it. Below you will find a few questions to ask yourself as you manage risk and consider your inevitable decisions.

AN ARCHITECTURE FOR DECISION MAKING

WHERE IS YOUR CONGREGATION?

Step One: The NYS Department of Health has divided the State into 10 Regions. In what Region does your church lie? You can find a map of these Regions and where they are in the seven metrics of reopening at

<https://forward.ny.gov/regional-monitoring-dashboard> and <https://forward.ny.gov/industries-reopening-phase>.

As of May 27th, the New York State guidance permits an indoor meeting of not more than 10 people or an outdoor in-car parking lot worship experience.

Step Two: Contact your county Health Department to see what the situation is in your community.

Step Three: Ask whether people commute into your church from other counties or communities.

Step Four: Check with your insurance company about any advice or disclaimers they might wish to provide.

WHO IS IN YOUR CONGREGATION?

Do You have At-Risk People in Your Church? The virus takes a greater toll on people over 55 years of age and those with underlying health issues, such as asthma, diabetes, respiratory issues, heart disease, etc. Do you have people like this in your congregation? It is important to realize that young, healthy people can get the virus and pass it on; they simply are less prone to get sick with it. Up to 80% of people who get the virus are asymptomatic but can still infect others

How Will You Accommodate Differing Comfort Levels? Some people may be comfortable returning to in-person gatherings; others may not be comfortable. Will you continue to offer an online version of your worship services, Bible studies, and meetings? Will you have a more isolated section of your sanctuary set aside for at-risk persons?

What About Children? When will you begin activities for children? Until then, will they be required to remain with their household family unit? There are cases where children have contracted the virus and become fatally ill; they certainly can pass it on to others.

WHAT IS YOUR BUILDING LIKE?

How Big is Your Building? How many people can meet in your sanctuary or meeting rooms and still maintain 6 feet of social distance between family groups living together and 12 feet when singing without masks? Will you have open windows to facilitate the flow of clean air or will you use air conditioning that recirculates the same air?

Code of Behavior? Will you require people to wear a face mask? Will you provide single use masks for those without masks? Will you require each person upon entering to sanitize their hands? Will you set up portable handwashing stations or provide alcohol-based hand sanitizer? Will these norms apply to outside groups who use your building?

Entrances? How many entrances do you have? Who will monitor those entrances and what will be their level of authority in maintaining the code of behavior the church has set for participants? How will you maintain social distancing while people exit the building?

Physical Cleaning? What provision will you make for sanitizing your space after each service or meeting? The virus remains on surfaces for 2 to 5 days. Will you limit your restrooms to one person at a time and clean them after every use? Who will monitor this and clean the room? Will you project all material on a screen to minimize the shared handling of paper?

Ordinances/Sacraments? How will you practice communion and baptism and passing the peace in safe ways?

What Signage Will You Have? How will you indicate to participants what the code of behavior is?

WHO DECIDES?

Who will make the above decisions and how will they be communicated to the congregation? Will you use a congregational survey to measure readiness? The Region can provide some sample surveys if requested.

WHAT WILL BE YOUR PROCESS?

When you feel it is safe for your congregants and your broader community to begin in-person meetings, how will you phase in that move? What “trip wires” would cause you stop and move back a step in the process?

CONCLUSION

OUR PURPOSE

The Region does not give legal advice. Nor does the Region give medical advice. We try to provide our churches with links to information provided by experts. You will find an annotated list at the end of this document. We are trying to support you as you think through the kinds of things you will need to consider as you face the inevitable decision of when it is safe for your congregants and your broader community to begin moving toward in-person gatherings.

We encourage you not to feel pressured by what other congregations are doing. Make the best decision for your people while honoring your values and priorities!

We will work to continue to provide you with updated information through our Region Notes (emailed every other week). If you are not receiving these, contact the Region office at office@abc-nys.org or 315.863.7148 to be put on the distribution list.

A PASTORAL WORD

The Bible affirms that each human being is made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). This means that each person who perishes from Covid19 impoverishes the creation in an incalculable way. This is why loving others is inextricably linked to loving God (Matt 22:36-40). The shepherd goes off in search of the single sheep because there is no relative weighed value when it comes to human beings (Matt. 18:12-14). May we all keep in mind that one sheep whom God treasures.

If we at the Region can be of any encouragement or help to your congregation during these challenging times, do not hesitate to reach out to us.

This material is available to you to assist you in ministry because of the gifts of our churches to the ministry of ABCNYS through direct gifts to the Region, United Mission giving, the ABCNYS Region Offering, and the America for Christ Offering. Without those gifts, you would not be receiving this.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES LIST

Many of these links have already been made available to you, but we wanted you to have them all in one place.

NYS guidelines for reopening churches and funeral homes (as of 5/28/2020):

<https://www.governor.ny.gov/sites/governor.ny.gov/files/atoms/files/ReligiousandFuneralServicesSummaryGuidance.pdf>

To read the full CDC guidelines for faith communities, go to: To read their full guidelines, go to

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/faith-based.html>.

CDC guidelines for cleaning and disinfecting public spaces: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/reopen-guidance.html?deliveryName=USCDC_2067-DM26911

General Secretary, ABCUSA, discussion guide on reopening: <https://www.abc-usa.org/2020/05/abcusa-office-of-the-general-secretary-releases-discussion-guide-for-reopening-church-buildings/>

Reopening webinar by: https://www.abcusa-insurance.com/reopeningsafely?utm_campaign=d1b92c66-48a4-4965-a773-320f03dd9a1c&utm_source=so&utm_medium=mail&cid=8cfe941d-1617-4e9c-bb87-e02e5e8a5d9e

Videos from Brotherhood Insurance Company on reopening:

<https://www.brotherhoodmutual.com/resources/safety-library/risk-management-articles/disasters-emergencies-and-health/general-health-and-injury-prevention/coronavirus/before-we-gather/>

“Christianity Today” article on reopening: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/may-web-only/when-churches-reopen-phase-coronavirus-covid-19-guidelines.html> Talks about the advantages of small group clusters.

Episcopal Guide to reopening: http://www.thediocese.net/Customer-Content/www/CMS/files/MWVA_Statement_6_0.pdf

NY FORWARD—A Guide to Reopening NY and Building Back Better” booklet (warning—it is lengthy): <https://www.governor.ny.gov/sites/governor.ny.gov/files/atoms/files/NYForwardReopeningGuide.pdf>.