

Church Reopening Checklist

In just a few months, COVID-19 dramatically changed our lives and turned our worlds upside down. The pain and anxieties it has caused around us are real. Additionally, as Christians, we grieve the inability to meet in person with our church communities. We deeply desire to gather again. However, we must act in safe ways that consider our most vulnerable neighbors and do not fuel the spread of COVID-19.

It is important to remember the Church never actually closed, just the doors to many of our buildings. As Christ's disciples, we are learning to worship, pray, encourage, witness, disciple, and serve in creative ways that minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

As restrictions on in-person ministries loosen, our churches face difficult decisions like when to resume in-person ministries and how to carry out these ministries safely. Churches around the country are feeling pressure to rush these decisions.

Following is a checklist you can use to help guide the process of reopening your church. Remember that the reopening process is not linear, and you may have to repeat certain steps. This is not an exhaustive list and will need to be adapted to your specific context.

✓	Church Reopening Checklist
Before Making the Decision to Reopen	
	Remember God's faithfulness and provision.
	Choose a "marathon" mindset, and realize that church members will have different viewpoints on what the right timing is, what risk level is or isn't acceptable, and how this should be done.
	Embrace humility and recognize our own limitations.
	Commit to staying current on CDC updates, government policies, and COVID-19 development.
	Form a church reopening team.
	Designate two co-coordinators (in case one becomes ill) to help oversee and guide your church's reopening plans.
	Designate two people on the reopening team to take responsibility for monitoring the latest CDC updates and other recommendations that will be relevant to phases of reopening.
	Communicate with the church about the team, its members, and that decisions will be guided by prayer, the needs of the church community, government restrictions, and scientific public health recommendations.
	Communicate with leadership and then the whole church on your four-stage reopening, including criteria, ways it cares for vulnerable people in your community, and flexibility of plan based on developments.
	After reviewing the best available information, create a list of possible risks, challenges, unknowns, and questions that give you concern or pause about reopening.
	After reviewing the best available information, create a list of possible benefits, opportunities, and information you have surrounding possibly reopening.

	Consider what practices and norms may put church staff, volunteers, members and attendees at risk as well as alternatives that will reduce risk.
	Identify vulnerable and high-risk individuals and groups in your church and community.
	Contact and collaborate with other church leaders in your community to increase the effectiveness of your plan.
	Communicate with local and state authorities to determine current mitigation levels in your community.
Preparing Your Staff and Volunteers for Reopening	
	Develop, update, and/or review your church's emergency plan (including policies on visitor management, visitor exclusion, face mask usage, etc.).
	Regularly remind people that plans may need to change between your meeting and day of anticipated reopening (i.e., you may not be able to reopen on the planned date because of COVID-19 changes).
	Announce and show your support for the members of your church reopening team and leadership (introduce with names and roles).
	Assign team, staff, and volunteer responsibilities to ensure safety guidelines are followed in your facilities.
	Make sure your church staff and volunteers have each other's emergency contact information, especially cell phone numbers.
	A COVID-19 outbreak in your community could lead to staff and volunteer absenteeism, so be sure to prepare alternative staff and volunteer plans to ensure as many of your church's staff and volunteers as possible are available for the reopening.
	Have your church staff and volunteers assisting with reopening your church review and sign off on your church's preparedness plan and COVID-19 policies and agree to follow the procedures.
	Virtually rehearse potential, difficult COVID-19 scenarios with church staff and volunteers (identify possible gaps or challenges, revise as needed).
	Designate staff and volunteers who will be responsible for attending to suspected or known COVID-19 attendees. Ensure they are trained on proper safety protections.
	Create a plan for how your church staff will work with volunteers to report a potential COVID-19 case or exposure to both public health officials and church attendees.
	Have a system in place to track contact between people (to implement if COVID-19 case is found in your community).
	Plan for how your church staff and volunteers will address infractions to safety policies put into place (e.g., not physically distancing, refusing to wear a face mask).
	Encourage your church staff and volunteers to think of reopening your church and navigating COVID-19 as a "marathon" not a "sprint," and help them adopt a long-term mentality and focus.
Preparing Members and Possible Attendees for Reopening	
	Consider member needs that require face-to-face interaction and create a plan to handle these situations safely.
	Inform members and possible attendees how your church will be implementing and following recommended social distancing guidelines.

	Share information about common signs and symptoms of COVID-19 with all church staff, volunteers, and possible attendees (e.g., through email, social media, website postings, posters in your church building).
	Tell others to stay home if they are ill, suspect they are ill, or have come in contact with someone who is ill within the last 14 days.
	Remind others that just because they are not showing symptoms, they could still be carriers of COVID-19 and could spread COVID-19 to others.
	Ask attendees to wear a face mask and take precautions to reduce risk if they choose to attend when your church reopens.
	Give guidance and resources (e.g., extra face masks) to church members on how to recognize and respond to improper use of face masks.
	Provide theological and safety rationale for any significant changes in practices and norms, get buy-in from key leaders and members, and let others know prior to reopening about any possible changes that might be expected.
On Actual Day of Reopening	
	The day before your planned reopening, update church members and possible attendees if your scheduled reopening is going forward as planned or if the reopening needs to be postponed (also communicate any last-minute changes in procedures, practices, and policies that need to be implemented).
	The morning of your planned reopening, update church members and possible attendees if your scheduled reopening is going forward as planned or if the reopening needs to be postponed.
	Meet with your staff and volunteers with plenty of time before you expect possible attendees to begin arriving to prepare together (start with prayer and Scripture).
	Make sure you have your church reopening co-leaders present to ensure your plan is implemented accordingly (and remind others of their leadership).
	Pass out instructions/checklists to staff and volunteers about their responsibilities, general protocols, key information (e.g., each other's cell phone numbers).
	Make any last minute changes in procedures, practices, or policies that may be needed.
	Screen staff and volunteers for fever or respiratory symptoms before they enter your church.
	Schedule some team meetings with staff and volunteers to check in about possible challenges that arise.
	Review your plans with staff and volunteers to make sure everyone is on the same page, make sure plans are still feasible, and address potential gaps that may emerge.
	Share information about common signs and symptoms of COVID-19 with all church staff, volunteers, and attendees at multiple points in the service (e.g., through email, social media, website postings, posters in your church building).
	Have designated staff and volunteers responsible for attending to suspected or known COVID-19 carriers in attendance. Ensure they are trained on the infection prevention and control recommendations for COVID-19 and proper use of personal protective equipment.

	<p>Lovingly turn away members and attendees to return home if they are ill, suspect they are ill, or have come in contact with someone who is ill within the last 14 days.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Assess the person’s ability to engage in home monitoring, the ability for safe isolation at home, and the risk of transmission in their home environment. ● Caregivers and sick persons should have clear instructions regarding home care and when and how to access the healthcare system for face-to-face care or urgent/emergency conditions. ● If possible, identify staff or volunteers who can check in via telephone calls, text, email or other means for those turned away.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Engage local public health agencies, home health services, and community organizations to assist with support services (such as delivery of food, medication and other goods) for those who may need such support at home. ● Identify telehealth services that can provide virtual care to those who are ill and need to be examined by a healthcare provider.
	<p>Ensure safety supplies are available throughout your church, like tissues, waste receptacles, and alcohol-based hand sanitizer.</p>
	<p>Remind attendees about alternative practices and norms (e.g., changes to how communion is served, offering, greetings).</p>
	<p>Model and communicate the importance of healthy coping approaches during COVID-19.</p>
	<p>Pray for those unable to attend in-person, and encourage attendees to be intentional in reaching out and offering virtual support to others.</p>
	<p>Announce how church leadership will be communicating about tentative possible next steps on reopening your church in the week that is to come, and remind attendees how quickly plans can change because of COVID-19.</p>
	<p>Remind people of God’s faithfulness and goodness.</p>
	<p>Show empathy and grace to each other.</p>
	<p>After your service, meet with your church staff and volunteers to pray and reflect on Scripture, thank them for their service, debrief, review the effectiveness of the plan you implemented, revise the plan based on lessons learned, and begin discussing what might be possible reopening next steps (remind staff and volunteers how quickly these plans may need to change and that they should be approached as tentative).</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. in Humanitarian and Disaster Leadership Program

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.

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Contact Us

Our website and social media accounts provide ongoing updates and resources for preparing your church for COVID-19.

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For resources on reopening the church, visit reopeningthechurch.com.

Note to Denominational Leaders

If you would like to use this checklist widely in your denomination, we're grateful to serve you in that way. If you're interested in adapting it to serve your churches, please email us at hdi@wheaton.edu and we can work quickly with you to add an introduction from your denominational leader, add your logo to the guide, and explore possible inclusion of additional denomination-specific content.

Citation

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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 checklist 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.