

COVID-19 - PLANNING REOPENING OF COMMUNITIES OF FAITH



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As a matter of fact, one in four Americans surveyed by Pew Research revealed that COVID-19 strengthened their faith; only 2% indicated that it has weakened their faith. Where we often could not find time to attend weekly church services, we are now dying to attend a live Sunday Holy Liturgy and taste the Holy Eucharist. And as boredom, anxiety, and uncertainty set in, people have been looking for new ways to stay occupied, productive, and composed. Spaces formerly reserved for home and family have been transformed by us into the office, gym, school, restaurant, and entertainment center. Moreover, the yearning to experience and explore the world through travel makes it feel like this is more of a necessity than a luxury as in the old days.

COVID-19 – WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Accepting COVID deaths (estimated at 2,000 to 3,000 per day) as the “NEW NORMAL,” countries are opening up, increasingly concerned about their economic prosperity which, after all, is a must for these countries and for our own survival. Employers are understandably worried about controlling and increasing productivity. Religions are scared and worried about distanced believers, survival, drop in income, and charitable contributions. Few still believe it is impossible to become infected in a church and threaten damnation for those staying away. Unfortunately, these fanatics will continue to cause many more deaths of the believers. In the midst of such a great crisis, you become just a number: one in 7.7 billion. The dead have been, unwittingly and unconsciously, morphed into a series of daily numbers. It is a condition whereby the sheer volume and constant deluge of negative or alarming information can numb our senses, can blunt our sensibilities – all in a reactive psychological attempt to protect our minds and our emotions from the actual horror of it all. I have not been wrong in my forecasts and statistics: U.S. deaths now exceeds 90,000 as I originally predicted while infected exceeds 1.6 million compared to 300,000 deaths and 4.3 million infected worldwide. Similar to India, Russia was considered a safe haven from Coronavirus. Today, Russia is the hottest spot across the world – second highest toll behind the U.S. It will be an irrational decision to relax and take your eyes away from this pandemic. Because of the urge and willingness to take risks by individuals, U.S. infections and deaths will more than double - now, anywhere from 95,000 to 242,000 lives are expected to be lost to the virus across the country before the middle of August, with an average estimate of 134,475 deaths. Of course, I clearly understand and respect that, in some cases, we have no other choice as the frontline and essential workers. However, if you do not take proper precautions and protect yourself using Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), you will become part of the statistics! No one else will look out for you and your family. Whatever heroic adventures you are thinking of undertaking which are outside of your “must-do-for-daily-survival-as-your-life-depends-on-it” criteria, you better think twice about going “...where no man has gone before!” Whenever you can avoid this, please do so, as it is NOT worth taking that risk. Please think about the grave consequences of your choice on you and your family! Although plenty of scientists, companies, and countries are on a race to be the first to come up with the preventive vaccine, we are still distant from a protective drug against COVID-19.

Doctors are still learning the complexities of the Coronavirus and its impact on human bodies. This virus cannot be taken lightly as its’ damage can extend well beyond the lungs, where infection can lead to pneumonia and acute respiratory distress syndrome, the sometimes fatal condition some patients had. The disease can also affect the brain, kidneys, heart, vascular and digestive system. Some patients have sudden strokes, pulmonary embolisms or heart-attack symptoms. Others have kidney failure or inflammation of the gut.

COVID-19 – WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Around the globe, life has been profoundly disrupted by social distancing efforts aimed at combating the coronavirus pandemic. Physical and social isolation have become the norm. Many of us have been personally impacted by deaths from COVID-19. COVID-19 related experiences will have long lasting impact on how we approach work, religion, and leisure, as well as our relationships. The way we experience and fulfill our needs have fundamentally shifted. Time, which we previously felt in short supply is now more fluid. Christian Easter, Jewish Passover, Hindu Pongal, Holi, Vishu, Askshaya Tritiya – all these holidays came and went past us, and we are now in Islam’s holy season of Ramadan, Eid Al-Fitr and Eid Al-Adha. I admire those religious leaders, who, for the sake of their congregants, have been cautious, and clear about why we must find new ways to worship. Unlike what many feared, our unwavering faith, traditions, and all our religions survived past COVID-19.

Infection can affect the nervous system, causing seizures, hallucinations or a loss of smell and taste. It may even affect pregnancies though the science is nascent per the Journal of the American Medical Association, April 30.

Always remember these words by Jesus in St. Mathew 6:19-21: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Were you getting too comfortable with this temporary yet tempting earthly living? Perhaps God is trying to talk to us even through this pandemic, to help us accept that we are NOT in control of this world and the masters of our lives in it. He, the creator of heaven and earth, is in complete control. Let us refocus our eyes from the earthly treasures to the heavenly treasures He promised us. Let us imitate a true “Christ-like” living by being loving, caring, and compassionate in everything we do every moment of our lives. St. John Chrysostom tells us to “give glory to God for all things!”

SUGGESTED GUIDANCE FOR REOPENING OF RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENTS:

Introduction:

Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” (Mark 13) In the verses just before this passage, the disciples marvel at seeing the Jerusalem temple, considered then to be one of the wonders of the world. Jesus’ deflating response is to say, in effect, “This? No big deal. It’ll be a heaping ruin before long.” Aghast, the disciples ask Jesus to reveal the meaning (and timing) of such a disaster. Again, Jesus seeks to tap down their over-reaction. “These things happen,” Jesus says; the real danger, however, is in the panic and misunderstanding that follows.

The coronavirus pandemic sweeping the globe has come upon us so suddenly that we have hardly had time to make sense of it. Nonetheless, we realize that it is a big deal, and not just in its immediate effects. Unlike in war, there is not going to be any announcement that the struggle is over. In some fashion, now only barely understood, this virus is going to be with us for quite a while. As a result, we are going to be living in a different world. In other words, we can look forward to a “new normal,” which at this time we can only guess at. And for that reason, we are confronting the danger Jesus warns about: becoming alarmed and being led astray.

Citizens across the world are daydreaming a return to normal, eyeing the calendar – June? ...Maybe July? – as if a switch will get flipped, and the coronavirus pandemic and its life-altering impact will fade to memory. That is not happening. I do not say this to frighten – and I have never wished so hard to be proven wrong – but we are a culture easily sold false hope. We buy up optimism when reality is too much to bear. These tendencies do not position us well for a global pandemic. Gary Slutkin, an epidemiologist and infectious disease control specialist formerly with the World Health Organization (WHO) said, “...the world is going to be different. Socially, we are going to be different, economically we are going to be different. I think there will be waves of things getting better and waves of things getting worse as we find our way.” And we will find our way. We will adapt and overcome. But now is not the time for sunny optimism. It is the time for science and pragmatism. The sooner the world accepts that “normal” is nowhere in sight – and that normal may look quite different when we get there – the better we all will be.

In our anxiety and frustration, it will be very tempting to listen to voices of “sunny optimism,” promising to lead us back to “normal.” As much as we want one, however, there will be no simple answer to the challenges that lay ahead. So, what do we do? In his explanation of the calamities to come, Jesus gives a curious interpretation. All these frightful things have to happen, Jesus says. Yet, “this is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” Jesus’ teachings and parables are filled with images of planting and surprise growth, of searching and surprise discoveries, of birth and rebirth, of dying and rising. The unifying theme of these images is that something new is coming into being which Jesus encapsulates in another image, the kingdom of God. We have tended to interpret this “coming kingdom” either as something personal and immediate, or as something far off in the future. Entering the kingdom has meant “being saved,” “believing in Jesus,” so that we will go to heaven when we die. The problem with these views is that they do not fit what Jesus actually talked about, which was mainly about facing the challenge and discovering the gift of life here-and-now. The kingdom is “at hand,” “in your midst,” and “within you,” Jesus says. And while Jesus understood the coming kingdom as a personal challenge, he also understood it in a social context. The kingdom was not only confronting you and me personally, it was also confronting our relationships as men and women, young and old, insiders and outsiders, religious and nonreligious, rich and poor, powerful and weak, oppressors and oppressed.

Among other things, this pandemic has suddenly exposed multiple fault lines in our society and our world. The most notable has certainly been the inadequacies and inequalities in our health care system. But there are many others: in international relationships, in education, in work and employment, in business and industry,

in our economic systems, in our wants and values. Many of these we have been vaguely aware of, but now they are starkly clear and unavoidable.

A common theme of spiritual traditions is living “in the now.” To do otherwise is to be distracted by what cannot be touched (the past) or what cannot be known (the future). Reality is always “now.” A second theme is that crisis and suffering, while not sought out, nonetheless present opportunities for discovery and growth. With these perspectives, I think we can hear Jesus’ words speak to us in our present-day circumstances. We must live with the challenges each day presents to us. The past is past; the future of this virus, along with its effect on our society and our own lives, is unknown and unknowable. In such one-day-at-a-time living, we can find a centering peace and purpose. We can be watching for where God is at work in this crisis, where the Spirit is moving people and us to enhance life and to bring about new life. We can then see what many others miss, what Jesus insists is always true: that every moment holds the possibility of the birth of the kingdom, of the creation of a world of peace and justice which is what God has always intended.

Millions of working people and small-business owners across the world who cannot earn money while sheltering at home are facing economic ruin. Therefore, many countries, seeking to ease the pain, are coming out of lockdown. Most have not met even minimal criteria for doing so safely, and some are reopening even as their coronavirus cases rise, inviting disaster. The much-feared “second wave” of infection may not wait until fall, many scientists say, and instead may become a storm of wavelets breaking unpredictably across the country. The reopening will proceed, nonetheless. The question now, scientists say, is whether the nation can minimize the damage by intelligently adopting new tactics. Evidence is mounting that masks – if worn in public places, by everyone – are far more effective at stopping transmission than was previously realized. Across the world, testing remains wholly inadequate, but home-use nasal swabs and saliva tests are on the way that may provide a clearer picture of where the virus is. Employers are moving to design safer workplaces. A modestly effective antiviral treatment has been found, but it is not a complete solution. And laboratories around the world are racing toward the grail – a vaccine – at an unprecedented pace. But while it may still be possible to blunt the negative impact of the reopening, the nations are finding even this goal difficult. Worldwide, people are already struggling to stay at home or remain six feet apart on crowded beaches, hiking trails and park playgrounds. Every crowd may have some silent carriers of the virus. You can definitely sense the challenges we face as religious establishments are planning their reopening – not a simple task on hand.

The When and How of Reopening:

Though I understand that in times of trial and fear Christians want to be together, and I cannot imagine the heartbreak of families who cannot gather to mourn those they have already lost to the virus or any other cause, I do not understand how easily some leaders of the faith disregard what Jesus said about his desire for us to “have life and have it in abundance,” or how they misrepresent our faith’s history during plague times. It is certainly true that from the Plague of Cyprian in the third century to the bubonic plague in the decades it ravaged Europe, Christianity continued to grow as a religion in part because so many saw the followers of Jesus ministering to the sick and endangering their own lives to be with the dying. The difference, of course, is that those Christians were providing medical care and companionship, not insisting on their right to carry on with life as usual. The coronavirus has killed over 167 Christian priests and pastors globally. Today, after experiencing the real impact and destruction of the spread of the coronavirus, I hope no church leaders are looking to reopen with a “business as usual” mindset. In 1 Corinthians 14:40-43, St. Paul writes, “Let everything be done decently and in order...since God is not a God of disorder...” While the verses refer to orderliness in the worship service, the principle of orderliness in God’s house can be applied to the church’s return to its facilities. The church leaders have a responsibility to protect, to anticipate, and to act on behalf of the faithful children entrusted to us by God.

To be orderly and not disorderly, let us think about reopening the church in three phases. These suggestions may not work in every church everywhere as there is no “one size fits all” solution. Therefore, tweak these suggestions to fit as deemed appropriate. We are already reaching more people online in both worship and in individual ancillary groups. During these past 6 weeks, I personally have been giving 3 to 5 sermons per week. We have pivoted quickly as the church, and we are learning new ways to provide spiritual support to the faithful. Small churches, large churches, and every size in between are going to look back on this moment in church history and remember these days – they are days of a paradigm shift that we have not seen before. We all will remember COVID-19 and how it changed us and our churches. Even if after we open our places of worship, until we are able to receive a preventive vaccine for this coronavirus, I still urge our congregants to use personal protection equipment (PPE), practice social distancing, and be extra cautious about attending large religious activities like weddings, baptisms, funerals, etc.

The most common strategy sensible church leaders are using when looking at reopening the church is watching and waiting to see how things will evolve over the next few weeks. There is the potential that we will begin gathering in phases, starting out with 20-50 people gathering, and growing from there over weeks or months. The Church hierarchies should now be developing strategic plans for the reopening of their churches. Slowly phasing gatherings over a period of time can benefit our community by putting the spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional health of our congregations first.

It is very important to honor and respect those in leadership and follow the directives of the your local, state, and central governments the whole way through this process. The way we once worshipped will inevitably look different. It is important to find ways to help our community prepare for this new way of gathering in the future. Although there is no definitive date to gather again, it is imperative for religious leaders to intentionally and genuinely love and continue to serve their community well in the meantime.

The Reopening – Strategic Thinking Phase:

- Continue to maximize the use of online platforms during COVID-19. It may be challenging but necessary for leaders to begin considering how this translates to the way we do church services in the future.
- Stay up-to-date on the latest gathering laws to ensure you are prepared with hope-filled messages, service opportunities, and a full staff to open again.
- Adjust future ministry models to accommodate the decisions of the government by slowly phasing gatherings for the well-being of our community.
- Evaluate the emotional state of your church community to guide them in the most appropriate way. If you know a large population of your church suffered emotionally or financially due to the pandemic, offer messages tailored to their current needs. If your congregation was overall fortunate enough to fare well, consider providing messages of service and love to those in the community.
- Over-communicate the precautions that will be taken at your church as you plan the reopening. People will have new health expectations after this crisis. Communicate that you are taking precautions to assure members that worship and other common areas are consistently being disinfected and that those serving in various capacities will wear gloves or provide numerous disinfecting stations
- Create contingency plans that minimize large gatherings. A few considerations could be maintaining online services and offering prayer meetings as you have been doing already throughout the week, in order to phase in the church community as smaller groups. In the meantime, use technology to allow small groups to continue meeting, reach out to your members one-on-one, and consider emailing a daily devotional or bible verse to keep members strong before you can fully reopen.
- Incorporate multiple services throughout the week to decrease the number of people attending at a time.

Using various resources like the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the World Health Organization (WHO), etc., I have developed the following recommendations to help communities of faith (all religious establishments) continue to practice their beliefs while keeping their staff and congregation safe. This guidance is not intended to infringe on your religious freedom enjoyed by law in your country. As we are now aware, gatherings present a special risk for increasing the spread of COVID-19 during this Public Health Emergency. It is my opinion that no faith community should be asked to adopt any mitigation strategies that are more stringent than those asked of similarly situated entities or activities. I have developed these suggestions that faith communities may consider and accept or reject, consistent with their own faith traditions, in the course of preparing their own plans to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In communities deemed to be significant mitigation areas, the risk to the larger community of continuing or resuming in-person gatherings should be taken into account and virtual options should be strongly considered. All decisions to follow these recommendations should be made in collaboration with CDC guidance and/or local health officials, as well as other state and local authorities who can help assess the current level of mitigation needed based on the levels of COVID-19 community transmission and the capacities of the local public health and healthcare systems. Look to the leaders of your state government and follow their directions (states will vary, which requires you adjust your phase-in). The following suggestions are provided as general guidance for consideration to the extent they are consistent with each community's faith tradition:

Proposed Reopening – A Phased Multi-Layered Strategic Approach Focused on the Safety:

Phase 1: Limit gatherings to those that can be held virtually (by remote viewing) for vulnerable populations and consider video streaming or drive-in options for services. Limit the size of in-person gatherings in accordance with the guidance and directives of state and local authorities, and maintain social distancing, consistent with the community's faith traditions.

Phase 2: Consider continuing to hold gatherings virtually (by remote viewing) for vulnerable populations and video streaming or drive-in options for services. Continue to limit the size of in-person gatherings in accordance with the guidance and directives of state and local authorities and maintain social distancing.

Phase 3: Limit gatherings to those that can maintain social distancing and consider video streaming or drive-in options for vulnerable population.

In all Phases:

- Establish and continue communication with local and state authorities to determine current mitigation levels in your community.

- Protect staff and congregants who are at higher risk for severe illness, encouraging use of options to participate virtually, if possible.
- Continue to provide congregants with spiritual and emotional care and counseling on a flexible or virtual basis or refer them to other available resources.
- Encourage other entities using the facilities to also follow this guidance.
- If the facility offers child-care or educational programming for children and youth, follow CDC guidance or guidance provided by your Ministry of Health for such programs.

Safety Actions:

Promote healthy hygiene practices (Phases 1-3):

- Encourage use of a mask or a cloth face-covering among adults at all gatherings and when in the building. Not using a cloth face-covering may also be appropriate at times for some individuals who have trouble breathing or need assistance to remove their mask.
- Have adequate supplies to support healthy hygiene behaviors, including soap, hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol (for staff and older children who can safely use hand sanitizer), tissues, and no-touch trash cans.
- Consider posting signs on how to stop the spread of COVID-19 and promote everyday protective measures, such as washing hands and covering coughs and sneezes, and properly wearing a face-covering.

Intensify cleaning, disinfection, and ventilation (Phases 1-3):

- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces at least daily and shared objects between use.
- Avoid use of items that are not easily cleaned, sanitized, or disinfected.
- Ensure safe and correct application of disinfectants and keep products away from children.
- Ensure that ventilation systems operate properly, and increase circulation of outdoor air as much as possible by opening windows and doors, using fans, etc. Do not open windows and doors if they pose a safety risk to children using the facility.
- Take steps to ensure that all water systems and features (for example, drinking fountains, decorative fountains) are safe to use after a prolonged facility shut down, in order to minimize the risk of Legionnaires' disease and other diseases associated with water.

Promote social distancing (Phases 1-3):

- Limit the size of gatherings in accordance with the guidance and directives of state and local authorities and in accordance with RFRA (Religious Freedom Restoration Act).
- Consider continuing to offer video streaming or drive-in options for services.
- As appropriate and feasible, add additional services to weekly schedules to maintain social distancing at each service, ensuring that clergy, staff, and volunteers at the services maintain social distancing to lessen their risk.
- Consider holding services and gatherings in a large, well-ventilated area or outdoors, as circumstances and faith traditions allow.
- Space out seating for attendees who do not live in the same household to at least 6 feet apart when possible; consider limiting seating to alternate rows.
- Consider whether other gatherings may need to have attendance limited or be held virtually if social distancing is difficult, such as for funerals, weddings, religious education classes, youth events, support groups, and any other programming.
- Avoid or consider suspending use of a choir or musical ensemble during religious services or other programming, if appropriate within the faith tradition. Consider having a soloist or strictly limiting the number of choir members and keep at least 6 feet between individuals.
- Consider having clergy hold virtual visits (by phone or online) instead of in homes or at the hospital except for certain compassionate care situations, such as end of life.

Limit community sharing of worship materials and other items (Phases 1-3):

- Consistent with the community's faith tradition, consider temporarily limiting the sharing of frequently touched objects, such as worship aids, prayer books, hymnals, religious texts and other bulletins, books or other items passed or shared among congregants; encourage congregants to bring their own material, if possible, or photocopying or projecting prayers, songs, and texts through electronic means.
- Consider modifying the methods used to receive financial contributions. For example, consider a stationary collection box, the mail, or electronic methods of collecting regular financial contributions instead of shared collection trays or baskets.
- Consider temporarily limiting close physical contact among members of the faith community during religious rituals as well as mediated contact through frequently touched objects, consistent with the community's faith traditions and in consultation with local health officials as needed.

the above safety actions. Consider conducting the training virtually, or, if in-person, ensure that social distancing is maintained.

Monitoring and Preparing:

- Check for signs and symptoms(Phases 1- 3); encourage staff or congregants who are sick to stay at home.

Plan for when a staff member or congregant becomes sick (Phases1-3):

- Identify an area to separate anyone who exhibits COVID-like symptoms during hours of operation and ensure that children are not left without adult supervision.
- Establish procedures for safely transporting anyone who becomes sick at the facility to their home or a healthcare facility.
- Notify local health officials if a person diagnosed with COVID-19 has been in the facility and communicate with staff and congregants about potential exposure while maintaining confidentiality as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or other applicable laws and in accordance with religious practices.
- Inform those exposed to a person who has been diagnosed with COVID-19 to stay home and self-monitor for symptoms, and to follow CDC or local and state government guidance if symptoms develop.
- Close off areas used by the sick person and do not use the area until proper cleaning and disinfection has been done; wait 24 hours to clean and disinfect to reduce risk to individuals cleaning. If it is not possible to wait 24 hours, wait as long as possible before cleaning and disinfecting. Ensure safe and correct application of disinfectants and keep disinfectant products away from children .
- Advise sick staff and congregants not to return to the facility until they have met established CDC or local and state government criteria to end home isolation.

Maintain healthy operations (Phases 1-3):

- Implement flexible sick leave and other related flexible policies and practices for staff (e.g., allow work from home, if feasible).
- Monitor absenteeism and create a roster of trained back-up staff. Designate a staff person to be responsible for responding to COVID-19 concerns; employees should know who this person is and how to contact them.
- Communicate clearly with staff and congregants about actions being taken to protect their health.

Closing (Phases 1-3):

- Check state and local Health Department notices daily about transmission in the area and adjust operations accordingly.
- In the event a person diagnosed with COVID-19 is determined to have been in the building and poses a risk to the community, it is strongly suggested to close, then properly clean and disinfect the area and the building where the individual was present.

Stephen Mitchell, the American poet and translator, provides an interpretive translation of Psalm 1 that illustrates what it means to die to self. His interpretation reads like this: “Blessed are the man and the woman who have grown beyond their greed, and have put an end to their hatred, and no longer nurture illusions. But they delight in the way things are and keep their hearts open, day and night...” Putting away greed, anger, and illusions, and rejoicing in the way things are, no matter how they are, we begin to understand what taking up the cross really means: it means to empty ourselves of ourselves. As our nation and world pray for an end to the COVID-19 pandemic that feels more and more like it is taking control of our lives, let us fervently pray for the many who have died from COVID-19, and for deliverance and liberation, and for healing and wholeness to return.

PRAYER FOR THOSE WHO DEPARTED FROM COVID-19:

O God of spirits and of all flesh, Who hast trampled down death and overthrown the Devil, and given life to Thy world, do Thou, the same Lord, give rest to the souls of Thy departed servants who have died due to the present pandemic. Give them blessed repose in a place of brightness, a place of refreshment, a place of repose, where all sickness, sighing, and sorrow have fled away. Pardon every transgression which they have committed, whether by word or deed or thought. For Thou art a good God and lovest mankind; because there is no one who lives and does not sin, for Thou only art without sin; Thy righteousness is to all eternity, and Thy word is truth. Keep them in our hearts and may they never become just a number or statistic. For Thou art the Resurrection, the Life, and the Repose of Thy servants who have fallen asleep, O Christ our God, and unto Thee we ascribe glory, together with Thy Father, Who is from everlasting, and Thine all-holy, good, and life-creating Spirit, now and ever. Amen.