



Guidelines for Re-Opening Public Religious Gatherings

We all recognize the need and desire to resume gathering together in houses of worship. No doubt, it will bring us joy to resume in-person worship and sacramental fellowship. Prudence demands that we do this carefully, in thoughtful alignment with the guidelines provided by national, state, and local health officials.

To help you think through how to responsibly and safely resume religious gatherings, Minnesota Family Council has adopted this resource for the use of your church or ministry from our sister organization Citizens for Community Values (Ohio).

Guiding Principles

The following are some of the factors to consider:

- The safety of your members and your community
- Holy wisdom on fellowship and gatherings
- The church's public witness
- The prayerful wisdom of faith leaders
- The particular needs and circumstances of your congregation
- The guidance of your insurance company and legal counsel
- The latest recommendations/orders from the CDC and the Minnesota Department of Health.

Communication Strategy

With your leadership team, outline a strategy for how you will communicate your upcoming plans. Keep in mind the following perspectives:

- Guidelines and recommendations are being updated continually. It's important for your people to be fully informed of your plans and protocols via email, website, and phone calls.
- Some 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, and those who are at higher risk from COVID-19 to understand why others in your congregation may be reasonably concerned for their safety. For example, some parents will be concerned if other young children come near their own while in the service.

See more communication steps in the sections below.

Personal Protective Equipment

When you decide to resume gathered worship services, there are a number of resources available so that you can access personal protective equipment (PPE) and sanitization material. Contact Minnesota Family Council for more details as this project is still developing.

Template for Re-Engaging in Public Religious Gatherings

The following document is not legal, medical, or policy advice. This phased-in approach is offered as a consideration for those desiring to resume public worship. Consult your legal counsel, insurance company, and medical experts for explicit recommendations.

Phase I

Possible Marker: After Minnesota's Stay-at-Home orders are lifted or amended

A. Days Leading Up to Service(s)

- a. Check with your general liability insurer, and the latest from the CDC, Minnesota Department of Health, and county- and municipality-level authorities.
- b. Develop tentative re-entry schedule with leadership team
- c. Communicate preparations and expectations via Facebook, website, video, and email.
 - i. No youth or children's classes; no nursery
 - ii. Follow CDC recommendations (**masks, washed hands, hand sanitizer, etc.**)
 - iii. Advertise adjustments below
- d. Encourage elderly, ill, and at-risk groups to stay home
 - i. Consider alternative service for healthy individuals 65 and over
- e. Consult resources for guidance on how to care for and protect children and youth. Families should be encouraged to keep their children in family groups.
- f. Continue to offer online/alternative worship services.
- g. Post signage of protocols inside and outside building.
- h. To limit crowd size, consider adding services to allow for staggered seating.
 - i. Example: one service for households with names A-M, another for households N-Z.

B. Day of, Before Service

- a. All attendees take temperatures before arriving
- b. Sanitation teams begin wiping bathrooms, door handles regularly with disinfectant
- c. Greeters present, standing 6-10 feet from doors, wearing masks
- d. Prop open doors to limit touching door handles
- e. Coffee stations and cafes should remain closed at all times
- f. Supply masks upon entry and hand sanitizer throughout the building, with touchless dispensers if possible
- g. "Closed" signs on kids' rooms and nursery with those doors locked
- h. Institute staggered seating requirements
- i. Ushers maintain physical distance while guiding people to seats
- j. Live-stream to other rooms/locations as needed.

C. During service

- a. No youth or children's classes (children stay in family groups)
- b. Do not direct people to shake hands, hug, etc.
- c. Encourage families/households to sit together
- d. Announce and observe physical distancing protocols
- e. Worship leaders and pastors should practice physical distancing and not share equipment (mics, instruments, music stands, etc.)

- f. Consider length of service time, taking into consideration the risks of exposure in longer gatherings.
- g. Minimize need for restrooms
- h. No offering plates passed; offer online giving or provide stationary open giving receptacles without handles
- i. Utilize screens or apps instead of hard copy bulletins and connect cards
- j. Lord's Supper
 - i. If applicable, consider pre-packaged communion elements
 - ii. Communion servers must wear masks and gloves
 - iii. Consider temporarily stopping practices such as common cup, intinction, etc.

D. After Service

- a. Structured dismissals (e.g. by rows or sections) allowing people to leave in smaller groups and go outside (no congregating in lobby)
- b. Sanitize all chairs, pews, equipment, bathrooms, etc.

Phase II

Possible Marker: Low spread of COVID-19 confirmed by Minnesota Department of Health after initial lockdown has been lifted or modified.

- A. Observe Phase I Protocols
- B. Church nursery and Sunday School resumes; other in-person ministries resume based on comfort level of leaders.
- C. Consider alternative service/location for those who may be at greater risk
 - a. Be sure to deep clean all surfaces and toys (if applicable) between services
 - b. Consider restricting number of children in each class

Phase III

Possible Marker: When Minnesota Lifts all Restrictions on Large Group Gatherings

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

Disclaimer: As we continue to receive updates and more information about the COVID-19 outbreak in Minnesota, this guidance is subject to change, and may lead to changes in normal church service routines for a longer time period than is covered in this brief guide.

“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.”

Psalm 46:1