



Decisions About Reopening Your Church

Living through a pandemic is not an easy thing! Deciding about when and how to open your church is also going to be challenging. All of us want to see things return to normal so we can have regular worship, Bible Studies, children's and youth ministries, and fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ. However, for each of us decisions about opening the doors of the Church is going need careful and prayerful planning. I hope you exhibit God's grace and patience with one another as we wrestle with various decisions.

Here are some Anglican Diocese of the South guidelines to consider as you make your decisions:

1. **Reopening our churches is going to be a process with multiple phases.** I recommend that you read the CDC/White House Guidelines that describe three phases: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/>. Since we are all in different settings (State and local), make sure you are up-to-date on your local guidelines for each phase.
2. **Reopening Phases should not begin ahead of any government ones in your area.** Do not get out ahead of your local communities. Some of you may decide that your phases may need to start after the government phases begin.
3. **Have a plan to implement for the different phases.** These should be discussed broadly and remain fluid as the situation with the pandemic is very fluid and can change things in your local community very quickly. Your plans should be clear communicated with your people. Make sure that your plan is communicated by at least Wednesday before the Sunday opening. This will give people time to decide if they should personally return at this time to corporate gatherings. *A rushed and poorly communicated reopening can be much worse for your congregation than waiting longer to reopen.* Please note that reopenings will look different for each of us depending our local conditions and the regulations imposed on gatherings and on landlords.
4. **Decisions for the phases of reopening should be made by the vestry and the rector together.** Decisions of this importance should not be made by the rector alone, or by the vestry alone. Before reopening, a resolution by the vestry should be passed affirming the plan for the specific phase of reopening.

5. **Not every member should return when you reopen.** According to the CDC Guidelines, the elderly (depending on the State – age 60 or age 65 and above) and others medically vulnerable should not return until your last phase. You need to make this recommendation clear, and make sure people are not “guilted” into returning too soon.
6. **Social distancing will limit the number you can have in your worship space** for at least the first two phases, and will almost certainly prevent you from having coffee hours, classes, childcare, dinners and other gatherings until the final phase or later. While it is not spelled out in the guidelines, individuals or families in worship will need a radius of at least six feet of social distance at all times in the first two phases. You may need to add services to make this possible, although the absence of the medically vulnerable may well obviate that need.
7. **Commonsense preventative actions must be followed.** Until there is a Covid-19 vaccine or medication available, and CDC recommendations change, masks, hand-sanitizer before entering the church, no one who has been exposed, etc. This should be in your approved plan.
8. **Communion will continue for now with Bread Only.** We will continue as we have been doing with the Celebrant consecrating Bread and Wine, and only the celebrant consuming the wine. Distribution of the Bread may continue as we have discussed before. IF Communion is distributed in the Church Building, it should be distributed in a way where social distancing is practiced, the priest is not in contact with the communicant, and the communicant does not touch or breath on other wafers.
9. **Continue to have online worship.** It will be a while before everyone returns to worship, and we are in a new culture. People will now visit your church online before they ever come to your church. Many will probably now *not* come unless they have worshipped with you online. It may be that you will have to reconfigure your worship space to allow for this.
10. **Please think through what it takes to reopen**, especially concerning what will be required in disinfecting your church. Check in with your volunteers to see who plans to return and help. These issues should be carefully discussed and decided by your leadership and staff. Ask: What are we not thinking about?
11. **No one should enter the Church without wearing a mask.** This includes the clergy, and this needs to be a seriously abided-by rule. Depending on the size of the worship space, clergy may take off their mask when preaching and when consecrating the elements as long as safe distance from other servers. In many of our churches, this would be within the “sanctuary” and masks could be removed.

12. **We have a number of vulnerable clergy who should stay home.** Meaning, they are in the age group who should not be out and about or have health issues. In the first two stages of the CDC guidelines you should be staying at home, or in groups no larger than ten. Your own vulnerability may be the primary reason to delay your reopening. Or you may train readers to lead Morning Prayer until you return. Some of you are more likely to be infected by a COVID19 patient or a caregiver, and this will affect your planning.
13. **Our Clergy are shepherds of sheep.** Most of the time we hear this and we think the shepherd is to feed the sheep (and they are!), but a role of a shepherd is also to protect the sheep. I say this in that we are to do our best not to put our people in danger. Of course, we can't force anyone to do anything, but we can *not* do some things which endanger the sheep. Please keep this in mind as you feel pressure to make certain decisions during this time.

Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. – Joshua 1:9

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