



Northern Illinois District

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

Ministry beyond Social Distancing

Reopening Churches, Schools, and Early Childhood Centers for the LCMS Northern Illinois District

“Weeping may last for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning!”
Psalm 30:5b

Part I: Churches

Preamble

When the shelter in place order was issued for Illinois in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, everything changed. Our places of work, the way we socialize, shop, and entertain ourselves, and even how our families connected were no longer happening in the ways to which we were accustomed.

The way our Lord connects us to His Word and Sacraments, to one another as the family of faith, and the way He gives us to nurture children in His love, teaching them of His grace and the world He has created for us, were also greatly affected as we sought, as a society, to respond to the potential danger, the suffering, and the losses Covid-19 brought.

However, with the hope that our Lord works all things together for good for those who love Him, who are called to His purpose (Romans 8:28), we trusted that these hardships would not remain. There would come a time when the shelter in place order would be eased. Then our institutions would again have the joy of connecting in person, though they would face some challenges finding how best to do that.

In an attempt to assist institutions with reopening, the NID assembled a team of pastors, educators, and district staff who researched numerous aspects of the challenges and opportunities in reopening. The following resource is neither exhaustive nor authoritative. It is submitted by our NID Reopen Team to assist congregations, schools, and early childhood centers as they consider how best to reopen. Part I of this resource will focus on reopening churches. Part II, to be released sometime in summer 2020, will focus on schools and early childhood centers.

Our team wishes to express gratitude to other districts, think groups, and individuals that have contributed to this resource. We encourage you to research how others are approaching reopening as no one source is likely to be comprehensive. May our Lord use this resource according to His gracious will that our night of weeping may come to an end and the morning of our rejoicing may begin.

Contents

- Assessing your situation today
- Expectations for and the timing of reopening
- Strategies and best practices
- Suggestions for continuing practices/resources for online ministry
- Stresses related to social distancing and the return to closer contact
- Issues of grief with the hope of Jesus' cross and empty tomb
- Matters of joy and celebration
- What's next once reopening has taken place

Assessing your situation today

The considerable changes that took place as the shelter in place order was issued by Governor Pritzker caused all ministries to change how they served our Lord and His people rather quickly. Many had to learn new ways of doing what we did and many learned to do entirely new things. What we can and cannot do seems to be in a constant state of flux. As you prepare for the time when social distancing restrictions are eased, consider the following items as you serve our Lord today:

- How has the Lord blessed you and the ministry you serve in the midst of this trial?
- What ways of continuing to serve the Lord and His people have you tried that have worked well? What improvements can you make in these areas now to more effectively serve?
- What strengths and growth areas has social distancing surfaced for your congregation? How does this create opportunities for “building up” experiences?
- As you begin to consider the return to reopening and easing of social distancing, consider what new practices have resulted in favorable outcomes that you'd like to keep. Consider what old practices/traditions of doing things to which you may not want to return merely for the sake of habit.
- In these past weeks, you may have had the opportunity to connect with and even receive contact information from people with whom you've connected online. As you move forward with reopening, consider how to continue a connection to online visitors through the following:

- Utilize an e-connection card.
- Develop online prayer groups and continue to receive online prayer requests as part of your worship service.
- Continue small groups online and continue inviting new people to them.
- Invite online guests to subscribe to your e-newsletter.

Expectations for and the timing of reopening

As congregational leaders make their plans for reopening, our team suggests considering the following points:

- Begin working with your congregational leaders now for the reopen. Coordinate with key leaders and create your own priority check-list, noting any materials and supplies you may need for the initial reopening date.
- Make your plans with the most vulnerable in mind: the nervous congregant or guest, the elderly, those with health-risk conditions, young parents, etc. Ask for their input on reopening and seek to make plans based on their needs.
- Consider how your institution's reopening will be perceived by your surrounding community, remembering that we represent Christ and His people in that place.
- If the public does respond to your reopening and seeks your response, consider who may be the best public spokesperson for the church [pastor, congregational chair, head elder, etc. If your institution has a crisis plan that may already be in place]. Plan how you might respond to both positive and negative feedback, giving a gentle and respectful witness of ***hope that we have in Christ. [1 Peter 3:15]***
- Be patient with congregational members who may be reasonably concerned about returning and may not come back immediately. Note who among regular attendees is missing and reach out to them with a caring contact.
- Seek to avoid comparing your institution's opening with other institutions', both in timing and activities. Our churches and schools did not all open at the same time originally nor have they ever had a “cookie cutter” look to their activities. We should not adopt that expectation with the reopen.

- Realize some will be upset that you've reopened. Some will be upset that you didn't reopen quicker. Some will be upset that familiar ways have changed. Some expressions of unhappiness will simply be a projection of other stresses people have been under. Let the peace of Christ attend you in all things. [Philippians 4:12-13]
- Give careful consideration to follow all CDC guidelines and state requirements. Where possible, consult with a medical professional.



First Saint Paul, Chicago

cart” or fellowship time may not come back immediately. Sunday School and children’s activities may also be some of the last activities to return.

Strategies and best practices

In the days leading up to the day of reopening, there are a number of things to consider. The following is an introductory list:

- The CDC currently has a web page with recommendations for faith-based organizations at cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/guidance-community-faith-organizations.html
Cook County, the Chicago Dept. of Public Health and sites such as AAFP IAFP also have the most up to date advice and recommendations. Plan to review these places as part of your reopen and use these sites as your best source for recommendations on practices to keep your faith community physically healthy.
- You may wish to consider having one staff member or active volunteer be the contact person in charge of keeping up to date with public health guidelines at the local and federal levels. This person could then help ease your community’s concerns related to rumors and misinformation by addressing them with researched knowledge.
- Develop a communication plan for your entire church/school that will inform members when and how your reopen will occur, and establish a format to answer concerns/questions members may have. Begin sharing details as soon as possible through all your forms of communication. This will encourage a joyful anticipation and help avoid surprising people on details that may scare them away at the reopening.
- Determine with leadership what type of phased-approach you will take for reopening. Will you keep live streaming or switch to posting a recorded service? Will you keep Bible classes online and for how long? How many services times will be offered in the reopen? A “coffee
- Before the reopening of worship services, talk through the logistics of the service with groups that may be integral to a given service – tech crews, ushers, greeters, Elders, Communion assistants, Altar Guild, musicians, choirs, and praise teams etc. Seek to alleviate their concerns or fears. Be as clear and specific as possible with them on their roles. If possible, consider developing a master script for each service.
- If possible, produce and share a video “walk-through” of what attendees might experience when they come to opening services.
- Encourage those who have reservations about physically attending worship, those who are vulnerable, and especially those already sick in any way to remain at home and worship through the means provided by your church during the initial weeks of the reopening.
- Consult with your insurance agent regarding your plans to reopen, gaining their perspective on what practices you plan to utilize for the safety of the community.
- Determine what your new seating maximum capacity will be for any one service. Seek to coordinate when families will attend worship. Online ticketing systems or requesting families come to services in an alphabetical order may help facilitate your capacity needs. Factor in “overflow” areas on campus where live streaming may be utilized.
- Develop a plan for what to do if someone does arrive to the service sick or becomes sick during service. Communicate the steps that will be taken to both congregational leaders and members.

- Before the opening services, have the facility professionally cleaned. Be sure to especially spray all services with disinfectant and wipe down all door knobs, toys, children’s “busy bags,” Bibles, and hymnals. Give particular care to light switches and knobs of faucets, water fountains, and bathrooms. Communicate with the congregation how the facility has been sanitized. You may wish to consider these further measures:
 - Keep the church kitchen closed.
 - Keep the nursery closed.
 - During the initial weeks of reopening, mark off the drinking fountains as not to be used.
 - If acceptable, simply do not provide any children’s “busy bags” or toys in phase one of your reopen.
- The day of opening services for your church consider the following:
 - Communicate with all service leaders and worshipers that all the measures being taken are part of showing Christian hospitality as we seek to welcome our Lord’s family and ours back into His house in the safest way possible, showing **Christ-like care for all. [Romans 3:12; 1 Peter 4:8-10]**
 - Encourage all worshipers to take their temperature before arriving.
 - Post behavioral expectations and safety protocols at each entry and on all online platforms the day before opening services.
 - Make extra masks available for those who may forget to bring theirs or in the event one accidentally falls on the ground.
 - Provide hand sanitizer in numerous places throughout the facility, if possible, through touch-free dispensers.
 - Host a service especially for healthy people 60 and older.
 - Prop doors open to limit handling door knobs.
 - Greeters and ushers are to maintain social distance practices and have them encourage attendees to do the same.
 - Stagger seating to meet social distancing protocols.
 - Make sure ushers have a plan on how to direct families to be seated to meet social distancing protocols.
 - Encourage immediate families to sit together and not to mingle as tempting as it is.
- Remove tables and chairs from the lobby or narthex to limit the temptation to gather in groups.
- Post a volunteer at each bathroom to regulate users.
- If possible, offer no bulletin but project service on screens.
- During the service itself,
 - Worship leaders should set the example, practicing social distancing measures.
 - Do not pass the plate for offering. Rather, post offering drop spots around the sanctuary and narthex and encourage attendees who are not already making their offerings electronically to place their offerings at the drop sites, maintaining social distancing.
 - Singing represents a risk to spreading droplets of the virus to a greater area than 6’ and droplets for a longer time in the air. Your leadership needs to seriously consider the advisement to suspend singing in the first phase of opening services.
 - Make sure all Communion assistants have thoroughly washed their hands and are gloved and masked.
 - Practices such as common cup and intinction for Communion distribution are advised against by the CDC during the initial phase of reopening.
 - Instruct worshipers that hugs, kisses, and handshakes will not be done.
 - Pastors, do not have a receiving line at the end of service.
 - Consider having a shorter service. This allows for less time for exposure to others and helps reduce the need for bathroom usage.
 - For those congregations that can, you may wish to consider using individual cups for Communion distribution.
 - For detailed instructions regarding the preparation and distribution of Communion, we recommend visiting the Missouri District’s site and look for “Guidelines for Resuming Public Worship” at mo.lcms.org
- After the service,
 - Give appreciation for all those who served to lead the service and for all those who helped reinstate worship that is physically present by their attendance.
 - Have ushers dismiss worshipers to ensure their safe exit and their maintaining of social distancing.

Make sure a cleaning team provides a thorough cleaning, sanitizing touched surfaces (doors, restrooms, water fountains, chairs, pews, etc.) before the next service.

- Each week, have your leadership team monitor all CDC protocols and state requirements, as they are updated, to determine when less-restrictive measures may be put into practice. Some measures may indefinitely or even permanently stay, but others may relax as the weeks and months progress. Try to remain fluid in your practices to meet with any recommended changes, and plan to over-communicate with everyone in your faith community about changes from week to week.
- Your leadership team should develop a plan for reclosing your church, school, or early childhood center in the event of a second wave of Covid-19, including communication to your members, and how to move again to an online-focused ministry.



● While not seeking to endorse companies through this report, the following is a list of groups that provide help and services related to online presence:

- Hootsuite – manages data across social media platforms
- Lightstock – provides images specific to social media
- Sproutsocial and Loomy – have social media management software
- Agorapulse – for social content engagement
- Buffer – offers a publishing content platform
- eClincher – offers feature-rich social media management
- Socialpilot – offers social media scheduling, monitoring and analytics (this is important for making data driven decisions)

● Remember, a front door to your ministry has now been brought to every living room that has connected with your ministry in these weeks of isolation. How will you continue to walk through that door with the hope of Christ?

Suggested Practices/Resources for Continuing Online Ministry

While most people are looking forward to returning to worship and congregational life in closer proximity, our Lord has blessed us in many ways through the use of technology in the days of social distancing. As social distancing is eased, consider the following for your continued online ministry:

- Keep your worship services available in some online format. Some people may not physically return to services for some time and others, such as shut-ins with computer access, have now grown accustomed to seeing their pastor leading worship for them again. Still others who do not live in your area now join you for the proclamation of the Word. Consider how the Spirit is using the Divine Service in this way through your online service.
- You may wish to keep Bible studies and small group fellowship opportunities going online.
- Many have posted devotions and may want to consider keeping this practice going, even if your posts are not as frequent.
- Hosting online new member groups may be especially important in the next year to welcome new people to your community of faith.
- Use digital contact cards in conjunction with live events.

Stresses related to social distancing and the return to closer contact

To say the least, we have all together been through a tremendously stressful and extended ordeal, but we have also all had our individual experiences of it. Some have suffered isolation for weeks on end, perhaps having no one to speak with and maybe lacking almost all physically affirming contact. Some have been overwhelmed by the regular diet of media reports. Some have suffered the stress of economic losses, troubles not related to Covid-19 that were not adequately addressed because of the pandemic, a general decline in health as means of exercise were limited, illnesses, and death.

By God's mercy, many faced these stresses with ***our Lord's peace which surpasses understanding***. Many turned to God's Word, maintaining or establishing regular times of devotion and reading God's Word, and finding comfort therein. **[Psalm 1, 27, 46, 121 etc.]** Yet, these stresses were also faced without the normal means of community support, and some in times of weakness may not have responded well under these stresses.

As social distancing measures become relaxed, there will be new stresses added in returning to interacting with others. The stresses of the shelter in place measures may now also manifest themselves in many ways.

As churches, schools, and early childhood centers reopen, these places will often be the places where people will seek comfort, healing, and answers from God. They may also be the place where such stresses are expressed. Leaders may want to consider the following points:

- No one has had a "typical experience." Try to treat each person as the unique child of God that they are.
- Some of the negative impact of the pandemic on individuals and families may not be realized for months or years. Be ready for a marathon of caring for all related to Covid-19.
- Everyone has had to compromise and make uncomfortable choices. You may want to provide ways that your faith community can talk about these.
- People will need to talk through the fact that we are not going "back to the way things were," but forward into a new experience of day to day interaction.
- Patience and care will need to be the abundant expectation for leaders and members as we are all figuring out what it means to operate in this new world.
- Be aware of your own limitations and struggles.
- Be aware of the support you need and risk being vulnerable to ask for help.
- Be quick to remind each other that we are all in need of Jesus' mercy and love and that we are equipped to be agents of His compassion. [Ephesians 4:32 – 5:2; Philippians 4:8-9]
- Find a means to discuss with your faith community their need for mental health care and what support and professional services are available locally.
- Be prepared for a rise in members sharing that they have been struggling with addictive behaviors.
- Routines and rhythms that help create healthy boundaries help in coping with stress. Seek to maintain these and model them for others.
- Seek to practice wellness self-care and encourage others in the same practices.
- In consideration of families, and especially children and their experience of the stress of this time:
 - Kids may be afraid to interact, so we need to communicate and model expectations and boundaries for interaction.
 - As children begin to interact with each other again, there may be a rise in bullying behavior as they look for some way to gain control.
 - Watch for children who are not engaging, having sleep issues, or relating experiences of nightmares.
 - Sadly, stresses are often expressed in abusive behaviors. Look for signs of domestic violence and child abuse.
 - Some families are now struggling (perhaps for the first time) with poverty, scarcity issues, and even shelter uncertainties or homelessness.
- Look for ways to be a Christ-like advocate for those who are weak and vulnerable. Seek ways as the Body of Christ to be the source of His compassionate love and mercy in word and deed to those who have suffered the ill effects of stress. [Matthew 25:34-40]
- Share resources that will help everybody establish routine devotions and the daily reading of God's Word and time in prayer. [Psalm 55:17; Acts 2:42]
- You may wish to encourage your members to journal their experiences.

Issues of grief with the hope of Jesus' cross and empty tomb

Closely related to the stresses we've all faced from Covid-19 is grief. While we have suffered stresses of various kinds, we have all also suffered losses. Some of the losses are more prevalent and affect the individual, including grieving the loss of a loved one or the grief that has come to those

who have lost their jobs and careers as a result of the economic upheaval that has accompanied Covid-19.

Yet even for those who have not suffered these kinds of losses, there is a collective grief that has come to people world-wide. There is the grief over the massive loss of life, similar to that experienced in war time. There is also a grief associated with the loss of life as we once knew it. Even if unaware of it, we are grieving how the things that used to be [like not having to keep 6 feet away from a person you pass on the sidewalk or the need to wear a mask in public, etc.] are now gone. It is compounded by losses such as our sense of predictability, justice, and our sense that we can protect the vulnerable such as children and the elderly. Silently staring into space and unexplained tears can be expressions of these griefs.

The rituals that mark the meaning of our lives have been missed: graduations, birthdays, anniversaries, sporting events, once taken for granted, have now halted, and we have missed funerals. While many have used social media and car parades to acknowledge some of these milestones which have helped encourage those directly affected by the loss, there is still a need to grieve. The kind of grief we are experiencing will linger perhaps years after the pandemic has abated. The Church has a great opportunity to bring the touch of Jesus' compassionate love to those who mourn during those months and years.

Followers of Jesus are obviously not impervious to grief. We do grieve, but we grieve as those with hope [1 Thessalonians 4:13]. As we reopen, acknowledging these griefs in the context of the comfort that Jesus provides in His own cross and the victory and the hope of restoration that is marked by His empty tomb will provide the beginning steps of healing and a means for the entire community of faith to grieve with those who grieve. As you move through the griefs that affect your part of the Body of Christ, consider the following:

- When the opportunities come to focus on the griefs people have suffered during the pandemic, consider these passages of Scripture that connect:
 - "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted" [Matthew 5:4]
 - "A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief... surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" [Isaiah 53:3-4]



- "He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces" [Isaiah 25:8]
- Psalm 22, 23, 121
- Jesus cleanses the leper through physical touch, then takes his place in the "desolate place" [Mark 1:40-45]
- Grieving as people with hope [1 Thessalonians 4:13]
- The great resurrection chapter [1 Corinthians 15]
- "and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" [Revelation 7:17]
- Conduct a memorial service that acknowledges all the funerals that had to be conducted for immediate family only. Encourage families to bring in a picture of their loved ones. If possible create a power point of all those from your church who have entered eternal life.
- Conduct a service of lament for the milestones missed in their usual ways but also a service of celebration for them now [graduations, weddings, birthdays and anniversaries].
- Create journals for parishioners to reflect on how the pandemic has changed their lives, for example, considering these questions:
 - What have you lost during shelter in place?
 - What have you gained during shelter in place?
 - What has this hardship revealed to you about Christ's grace?
 - What has the Lord used this hardship to deepen your trust in Him?
 - What has the Lord taught you through this hardship about your family?
 - What is your hope in Christ for the future?

- Create discussion groups to talk about grief and the comfort of Jesus' love.
- Be sensitive to when someone may need professional grief counseling. Have referral resources ready.

Matters of joy and celebration

With the flattening of the curve of new infections, the decline in daily losses of life, and the easing of social distancing there does come relief and times of celebration. While we will mourn losses, there is also now a time to give thanks joyfully to God for how He has sustained us during these trials. There also now comes a time, as we again come together, even with some limitations, to celebrate the good our Lord has worked in these days of trial.

As your community of faith comes together and churches reopen, consider the following related to celebration:

- As opportunities come to focus on the joys our Lord has given us and the things we will celebrate, consider the following passages of Scripture:
 - "Rejoice in the Lord always, again, I will say, rejoice" [Philippians 4:4]
 - "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly... giving thanks to God the Father through him." [Colossians 3:16-17]
 - "Weeping may last for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning!" Psalm 30:5b
 - Psalm 27; 46; 136; 138, 145; 148; 150
 - "For those who love God, all things work together for good." [Romans 8:28]
 - "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." [Philippians 4:13]
 - "Looking to Jesus... who for the joy set before him..." [Hebrews 12:1-2]
 - "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth..." [Revelation 21:1-4]
- Host a "belated" Easter service even if your church held a celebration online on Easter itself.
- Plan a non-gathering recognition of celebrations while we were apart [graduations, proms, weddings, births, baptisms, etc.] Create an online slide show with photos of these events in isolation.



St. Paul, Beecher

- Where appropriate, host a renewal of vows ceremony for those marriages that took place in isolation.
- Where appropriate, lead services of acknowledgements of Baptisms that took place privately or in homes during Covid-19.
- Host a "Thank God for You" celebration to honor all front line workers from your congregation that served during the days of shelter in place [healthcare workers, police and fire, grocery and delivery workers, etc.].
- Create a church hashtag for parishioners to share photos of their time away from each other such as #sharestories
- Host a celebration of all the ways the Lord used your family of faith to reach out with the gift of His mercy and good news through these days.
 - Share specific stories of how people witnessed their faith [through sidewalk chalk messages, through participating in Zoom Bible studies and prayer groups, through how they "tagged" their homes as followers of Jesus, etc.
 - Develop stats on what your church did and share these. For example, "during these weeks we collected so many cans for our food pantries, so many calls on our elderly were made, so many masks were made/or collected, etc."
- Joyfully acknowledge all the ways volunteers helped keep ministry going while in shelter in place.
- Create yard signs that celebrate/thank God for members of your ministry or that your church is reopen.
- Create space within your sanctuary where people can post their thanksgivings to God and their celebration points for all to see.

What's next?

Our Lord says in **Jeremiah 29:11** ***“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for wholeness and not for evil to give you a future and a hope.”*** The churches, schools, and early childhood centers of the Northern Illinois District will, by God’s mercy, reopen. This will happen over a period of time. It will happen in different ways. Some reopens will run smoother than others. All will encounter difficulties as well as reasons to rejoice. Yet, because of the gracious promises of our Lord in His Word, because of the hope that is ours in Christ, crucified and risen, we will move forward under the loving promise and plan of our Savior, Jesus.

This is a fluid situation. Even as this resource is submitted for your help, we realize conditions may have already changed by the time you are able to use it.

The NID Reopen team encourages you to continually monitor all CDC protocols and state reports and requirements related to Covid-19. We encourage you to look at other reopen plans as this resource is not exhaustive and other groups have done tremendous work to assist our institutions in the reopen process.

We encourage you to continue to check the NID website, nidlcms.org for updates on reopening including Part II of this resource that will focus on reopening schools and early childhood centers.

Finally, and most importantly, we encourage you to submit all your plans and efforts to our Lord in prayer, asking that His will be done in all that we do, even as we ourselves have done.

Your Servants in Christ,

The NID Reopen Team

Rev. Jim Buckman
Ann Ciaccio
Amy Cimarusti
Andrew DeWitt
Rev. Matt Hoffman
Lois Stewart
Rev. Kris Whitby
Rev. Bill Yonker

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Dr. Hannah Graham, M.D.
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Produced by:

LCMS Northern Illinois District
2301 S. Wolf Road
Hillside, IL 60162
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