

EFCA WEST COVID19 GUIDANCE #3
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CHURCH RESPONSE TO EASING OF RESTRICTIONS

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Much has been written and broadcast in recent days regarding “reopening” or “restoring” church meetings once COVID19 gathering restrictions begin to ease, and much more will follow in the weeks to come. This guidance is not intended to replace or duplicate that provided by other sources. Rather, it is intended to help church leaders determine how to evaluate such guidance and determine what to do in light of it.

We encourage church leaders to thoughtfully consider guidance provided by reputable sources of church leadership information with which they are familiar. Avoid taking actions based upon unverified social media postings, blogs and videos as it is often unreliable. Likewise, news media reports of some pastor or some church somewhere deciding to do something sometime should never be used as potential guidance regardless of how broad its exposure. With 328 million people in our country, somebody is always doing something.

When considering suggestions and guidance from others be aware of at least these two issues that can lead us to very poor decisions.

- **Confirmation Bias:** Wikipedia defines confirmation bias as “the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms or strengthens one’s prior personal beliefs...” It’s the tendency humans have, including leaders, to see things through their own filters, to filter out that which contradicts what they expect or want to find, and remember mostly those things that confirm what we want confirmed. Most of us believe that we are not prone to confirmation bias, and that is its danger. Most of us don’t believe we are prone to what we all are prone to doing simply because we are human. Confirmation bias is part of our nature.

One of the best ways I’ve found to avoid confirmation bias in significant decisions (and this is a significant decision) is to get information from several sources and to consciously look for and evaluate input that is contrary to that received from others. Be sure to look at all sides of the decision to be made with the same care.

We all want to gather together again in large group worship and fellowship as soon as possible. Don’t let the strength of that desire overrule your common sense or cause you to not fully consider contrary viewpoints from those that have a stake in your success. Our desires are generally not well spoken of in scripture. Wisdom and prudence are celebrated.

- **One-Size-Fits-All Fallacy:** This fallacy gives a name to that which we already know – one size never fits all. When seeking advice from any source, leaders must keep in mind that consultants, authors, mentors and sages all give advice that is based upon their own life experiences.

This danger can be most damaging when we are looking for ideas to navigate uncharted territory. We have a favorite or familiar author that communicates something that seems to make sense, so we follow that advice and apply it directly to the problem we face. Sounds good, but a vital step is missing. That step is to carefully evaluate whether or not the proposed actions will likely achieve the same level of success in my unique ministry environment at this time. Regardless of the status of the writer or consultant, always keep in mind this vital step in your decision-making process.

Here are some basic considerations for developing a strategy for what to do regarding starting to meet again.

- **Filter every strategy through the church's mission and values/priorities.** This may be harder than one at first thinks. Among the things to consider are:
 - A top priority is to avoid inadvertently taking an imprudent risk that endangers the health of those that attend our church or live in our community. We are to love our neighbors as ourselves. Though it is painful to hear, it is nonetheless true – it will be safer to delay than to be among the first to renew gatherings. Will holding off for one more week be as devastating to the church as having a second wave of the virus spreading linked to our church's gathering?
 - Another top priority is to consider how our actions will be viewed in the larger community and perhaps beyond. How will our church's and our Savior's reputation among the people we seek to bring to Christ that live in our community be impacted by the course of action we are about to take? This will vary from area to area. We recommend that churches comply with the official rules, regulations and recommendations from officials of your own community.
 - Secondary priorities could include re-establishing relationships (small groups), worship with families while age-based ministries remain closed, building bridges to serve the community, and similar actions that show movement toward more normal operations.
 - Another major decision-making filter is to avoid making decisions based upon what is allowed or permitted instead of on what is most likely to be beneficial in the long term to the church – its people and its mission.
- **Remove words such as “restart,” “reopen,” and “return to normal operations” from our vocabulary.** This is because such words create unrealistic expectations in our congregations as well as in our own heads about what is going to happen. We will not be returning to “normal” any time soon, if ever. Rather, restrictions will be eased over time. Consider referring to the “easing of restrictions” rather than the “ending of restrictions.” Words matter.
- **Strategize resuming operations as restrictions are eased from a “multiple, interrelated tasks” point of view rather than from a church-wide whole perspective.** For example, the issue to be decided is not just whether to start worship services again but what to do about nursery, children's and student ministries, adult classes, seating arrangements, ushering and greeters, offering protocols, hospitality/refreshments, screening people for symptoms of illness, and continuing an on-line presence for those that are not comfortable as yet to attend larger groups. The worship service is not a

singular unit but a multifaceted meeting of concurrent interrelated tasks, each with its own ramp up considerations and protocols.

- **Most guidance we've seen for starting church gatherings again includes recommendations for prior deep cleaning as well as ongoing cleaning while groups meet.** This requires cleaning supplies that remain difficult to find in many areas. We recommend that churches not announce a date for beginning to gather until a two-week supply of required cleaning supplies is already on hand and can be replenished. Don't put yourself into position to cancel the first time you were to meet in months because supplies that have been ordered have not yet arrived.
- **Make plans for what you will do when size restrictions for groups are gradually raised.** Probably the first groups to gather will be staff and leaders, followed by small groups. Consider what you will do now (if anything) when people are allowed or encouraged to resume meeting in groups of 10, 20, 50, 100 and 250. Don't expect these limits to be reached quickly – it will likely be a gradual process over weeks and months.
- **Do what you know will be fine, not what you hope or think will be fine.** This is vital when risks are significant and bad results cannot be reversed (like a second wave of COVID19 infections),

As with all major decisions, the EFCA West team recommends that church leaders consult with others outside their church and not just among yourselves or with your friends. One of the key roles for EFCA West is to strengthen church leaders by consulting with them as they navigate difficult situations. Please allow us to do that for you and the church you serve. Feel free to contact us personally (individual contact information is at <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/district-leadership/>) or through our main office at efcawest@efca.org.