



GATHERING TOGETHER AGAIN

QUESTIONS THAT GUIDE
MOVING FORWARD

UPDATED AND EXPANDED

7/10/20

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GATHERING TOGETHER AGAIN: QUESTIONS THAT GUIDE MOVING FORWARD

Over the past several weeks, our Tennessee Baptist Mission Board staff has talked with thousands of pastors and a recurring question we've been asked is this: "When can we reopen our church?" As you know, within our Baptist polity that is not a question seeking permission but rather an informed perspective. I wish there were a single response with a definitive date, but that is a call every church must make for itself. There is a myriad of reasons why there is no definitive date, and why this is a local church decision.

1. All Tennessee Baptist Churches are autonomous therefore are free to choose for themselves the best decisions based on the desire of the local congregation.
2. Local churches best understand the environment in which their churches exist, i.e. how COVID-19 has affected that local community.
3. Local churches best understand the makeup of their congregations and the dangers posed to those in their congregations who fall into "high-risk" categories.

There are no easy answers as we continue to navigate uncharted waters. Pastors and churches must balance the need to be a good neighbor in following social distancing guidelines and the risks being communicated by medical experts.

With that in mind, the TBMB compiled the information in the following guide to help you identify key considerations as you make wise decisions about when to reopen your church. I am very proud of the hard work of TBC churches over the last five to six weeks. You've been creative, courageous and diligent as you have sought to seize this unprecedented opportunity for gospel advancement. I believe our greatest opportunities lie ahead of us. This is a preliminary document to get you started. We'll release more information next week. The key is to proceed with caution and prudence.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if there is anything we can do to serve you. May God bless you with wisdom as you move cautiously forward.

It's a joy to be on this journey with you.



Randy C. Davis
President and Executive Director
Tennessee Baptist Mission Board

❑ LOGISTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As soon as the lifting of orders by the governor and/or municipal authorities occurs, some basic logistical items need to be addressed before you invite people onto your campus. As with everything that we do for the Lord, we should strive for excellence. Now is the time to walk your campus with fresh eyes in regard to upkeep and cleanliness. The overall appearance of your campus speaks to guests louder than ever about your focus towards their health. It is likely that the safer they feel the sooner they'll return.

FORM A LOGISTICS TASK FORCE AND ASK THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

1. Are there medical professionals or county health department personnel you could work with to help develop best practices related to the health of your guests?
2. Who will provide campus “policing” of the protocols? More specifically, who will work under the authority of the pastor/elders to keep an eye on the basic health protocols for the next 2-6 months?

❑ CLEANING/SANITIZING BEFORE GUESTS ARRIVE

Protocols should be implemented to reduce the spread of the virus on campus (remember, the virus is not eradicated). Consider:

1. What areas of the church need to be deep-cleaned before anyone returns to campus?
2. Who can be recruited to do this? (Volunteers, church staff)
3. What resources do they need? (Cleaning materials – are they adequate for coronavirus and generally available or do they need to be ordered?)
4. What ongoing (daily, weekly, monthly) cleaning protocols need to be developed and implemented once you are meeting on campus again?

❑ CONTACT PROTOCOLS WHILE GUESTS ARE ON CAMPUS

Discuss procedures and processes to minimize personal contact. Frequently sanitize high-touch surfaces when guests are on campus. Consider:

1. What resources need to be purchased and stationed throughout the campus for use while people gather (for example, hand sanitizer, disinfectant spray/wipes)? Availability of these supplies might be limited and prioritized to healthcare facilities. How will you gather them?
2. What measures could you implement to curtail the spread of germs while people are on campus (for example, greeters wiping down doorknobs, bathrooms cleaned at least once during morning, sanitizing between services)?
3. What are acceptable greetings instead of handshakes or a hugs? Remember, we need to start with a 6-foot separation.

☐ GET READY FOR COMPANY

As you walk your campus with fresh eyes in preparation for a return to on-campus activities, make note of items that need attention. Consider:

1. What areas of the campus need an additional refresh or tidying up to exhibit a better overall cleanliness?
2. What is the cost of these projects?
3. Who can be recruited to do this? (Volunteers, church staff)
4. What resources do they need?
5. What are priorities based on need and availability of resources?

☐ LEADERSHIP

Leading well through this time of uncertainty is essential. Gather prayerfully with your leadership team to navigate this time of transition. Evaluate the mission to which God has called your church and identify how you may continue to impact your community. Make sure your leadership team has “buy in” to the church’s mission. If they are not sold on it and they are marginally supportive, focus your time on a mission that expresses who you are as a church. There will naturally be new ministry opportunities to develop, and very likely there are some prior ministry programs that may be obsolete. Consider:

1. How can you communicate to your church and community the steps you are taking to maintain clean and safe conditions on campus and a relevant ministry future?
2. What good habits has your church embraced these past months that you need to immediately integrate (for example, care through small groups, digital communication)?
3. What should you stop doing? What should you begin? What ministries do you need to continue pausing due to Covid-19?
4. Do church staff changes need to be made (for example, change in position responsibilities to address new ministry needs)?
5. Are your governing documents in order so you can do business on line?

☐ WORSHIP SERVICES—WHAT WILL THEY LOOK LIKE?

Adapting elements in your service and church programming for “loving distance” will be helpful for the near future. Consider:

1. What adjustments in seating could you create to foster wise distancing (for example, adding a service, spacing chairs, encouraging “spread”)?
2. What alternatives to passing the offering plate and Lord’s Supper trays (where everyone handles them) could be implemented while still highlighting giving as worship and encouraging corporate participation in the Lord’s Supper?

3. What alternate pathways of connecting could you implement to limit physical interaction (for example, creating digital welcome cards or sermon responses, putting worship guides on tables, removing hymnals and using projection only)?
4. Do policies and procedures for celebrating believer's baptism need to be discussed?

❑ EVALUATE MINISTRIES IN LIGHT OF HOW PEOPLE FEEL, NOT BY THE NUMBERS

When people leave their homes to gather, addressing ministry needs is more complex. The church must be prepared for immediate logistical and personal realities. People will not be the same when they return. This is the residual of a nationwide crisis – people grieve and should be given space to grieve. This is a process of crisis management. New opportunities to minister exist, starting with the way people feel as a result of forced change. Consider:

1. How could you create a hybrid between on-campus and online platforms for those unable or hesitant to return to campus in the near future, or for the broader community wanting to remain connected from afar (for example, small groups, prayer meetings, ministry teams/committees, etc.)?
2. Will your church continue to offer childcare during services in the same way it did before? If so, what additional precautions will you take in this area (for example, temperature checks, snack time modification/elimination)?
3. What preparations do you need to begin making now to be ready for adjustments to your summer programming (for example, VBS – on campus, virtual or at home)?
4. How will you address the personal and family struggles that may have surfaced in the last couple of months (for example, marriage or financial strain, emotional or physical abuse, job loss)?

❑ FINANCIAL – KEEP THE CHURCH IN ORDER

Financial planning is critical as you plan to reopen your church campus. Consider:

1. What has been the impact on tithes and offerings? Can you project long-term trends on giving? What is the bottom-line impact of these giving trends?
2. Cleaning and contact efforts will be an ongoing expense that is most likely beyond current spending plans. How will you fund these required resources (donations of cleaning supplies, financial adjustments, etc.)?
3. What new ministry opportunities have you identified and what are the associated costs?
4. How could you make immediate church-budget adjustments?
5. Have you led the church to consider the missionaries supported through the Cooperative Program, Golden Offering for Tennessee Missions, Lottie Moon Offering for International Missions, Annie Armstrong Offering for North American Missions, their local association and others? These are real people called by God and sent by your church to minister in difficult places. They are trusting you and your church to hold the rope even in difficult times.
6. What creative things are you doing to help church members who have lost their jobs?

An aerial photograph of a large crowd of people standing on a light-colored floor with a dark grid pattern. A large, semi-transparent red circle is centered over the image. Inside the circle, the text 'GATHERING TOGETHER AGAIN' is written in bold, dark blue, sans-serif capital letters. Below this, the words 'PART 2' are written in a large, bold, red, distressed font, enclosed within a red rectangular border with a rough, hand-painted appearance. At the bottom of the circle, the text 'ACTIONABLE PLANS FOR MOVING FORWARD' is written in white, sans-serif capital letters on a dark blue background.

**GATHERING
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PART 2

**ACTIONABLE PLANS FOR
MOVING FORWARD**

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PREPARING THE FACILITY FOR RE-ENTERING

□ PREPARE YOUR CONGREGATION AND GUESTS

1. Communicate Expectations - Prepare your congregation for what to expect upon arrival at the facility. Try to anticipate the anxieties and questions congregants will have and prepare them in advance via mass communication systems (email, broadcast text messages, All-Call systems, etc.). Social media is also quite effective, primarily Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Let them know where to park, where to enter, where to sit, and whether restrooms will be available. All adaptations should be identified and communicated in advance.
2. Website Updates - Your church website is still your most-frequently visited front door, particularly for guests. Be sure your church plans, adaptations and expectations are clearly spelled out in positive, forward-looking language.
3. Continue live-feed broadcasts of your services and encourage those who are ill, have a temperature, or who might be vulnerable, to remain at home for a while longer.

□ PREPARE THE FACILITY FOR GUESTS

Facilities unoccupied for 10 days or more will not have evidences of COVID-19 on any surface. However, proper precautions are encouraged and will be greatly appreciated by anxious members and guests returning to your facility for the first time. Make sure to communicate these steps clearly, prior to their arrival:

1. Be aware of the architectural layout of your facility. Some facilities have natural “choke-points” where people will naturally converge while circulating (hallway intersections, small lobbies, vestibules, etc.). Develop and communicate, with signage, the preferred circulation routes to avoid these areas and to encourage movement rather than gathering.
2. Be aware that safety codes, applicable laws, and security requirements may not be violated to accommodate social distancing.
3. Perform standard and deep cleaning using CDC recommended practices and EPA-registered products, focusing on high-touchpoints, immediately prior to first gathering. Encourage cleaning staff to use and dispose of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE). Train staff and volunteers to reference the Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS) for proper use of each product.
4. Place hand-sanitizing stations at all entrances with proper signage encouraging their use.
5. After congregants enter each service, have a volunteer team, with appropriate materials, re-clean all high touchpoint surfaces.
6. While COVID-19 is not transmitted freely by air, prepare your HVAC system for reopening your building by changing system filters (be sure to use PPE) and cleaning the system coils. This should be all that is necessary to maintain indoor air quality.

7. Consider the use of continuous cleaning surfaces, like NanoSeptic® pads, for high-contact touchpoints, including door handles, elevator buttons, light switches, etc.
8. Consider the use of hands-free fixtures in restroom facilities.
9. Restrict the use of check-in kiosks that require user touching.

❑ CONTROL ACCESS AND CIRCULATION

1. Use professionally prepared, appropriate interior and exterior signage on all parts of the facility to direct traffic flow, circulation and behavior.
2. There is no evidence that COVID-19 can be transmitted by foods or food packaging. However, it is suggested to close the church kitchen and prohibit serving food in classrooms and lobbies to avoid gathering and lingering. Appropriate food-handling resources and guidelines related to COVID-19 can be found at the National Restaurant Association website and at the ServSafe® website.
3. Consider the use of floor marking products like TexWalk® for printed floor graphics, to overlay hard and carpeted surfaces.
4. Prop doors open during high-flow entrance and exit times.

❑ FACILITY SOCIAL DISTANCING

1. Consider closing smaller spaces like Sunday school classrooms and conference rooms to avoid gatherings in confined spaces. The proper capacity of any room to maintain proper distancing is the net area of the room divided by 36. For example, a 400 square foot Sunday school classroom can only accommodate 11 persons to maintain safe distancing. This may require that Sunday school classes forgo meeting for the time being or relocate to larger spaces.
2. Be sure lobbies and elevators have proper signage to encourage proper distancing while people wait. Elevators should be limited to a maximum of two persons.
3. Avoid the distribution of bulletins and the passing of offering plates. Again, be sure to communicate these things clearly beforehand and with the proper onsite signage.

ADDITIONAL EXPERT RESOURCES:

Disinfection/Cleaning Products Registered by EPA

<https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2>

Facility Signage

<https://www.signs.com/covid-19-signage/>

High Contact Surface Continuous Cleaning Pads

<https://shop.nanoseptic.com/>

Printable Floor Graphics

<https://www.jessupmfg.com/products-solutions/graphics-media/shop-by-brand/texwalkr.html>

Food Handling Resources

<https://www.restaurant.org/COVID19> or <https://www.servsafe.com/>

PREPARING FOR PRESCHOOLERS AND CHILDREN

As restrictions begin to be lifted, we must be mindful not to be quick to go back to what we've always done, just because we can. A good reminder from 1 Corinthians 10:23 is that while everything is permissible...not everything is beneficial.

When looking at re-entry for preschoolers and children, churches would be wise to weigh risk vs. benefit. Take a careful assessment of all those affected. Evaluate if it will be beneficial or harmful to them to be a part of coming together while social distancing is still a requirement. Those affected might include:

- Preschoolers
- Children
- Senior adult leaders
- Grandparents in the “at risk” age range

Both parents and the church have the responsibility to protect children entrusted to their care. Have parents been asked if they are comfortable with their child returning to a small group? What things would need to be in place for them to allow their child to return to a small group?

Important areas to consider when deciding about re-entry, should include but not be limited to, the following:

☐ **BEGIN WITH WORSHIP ONLY**

1. Have an entry and dismissal plan.
2. Families sit together.
3. Practice social distancing within the worship area.
4. Eliminate items that require physical touch, i.e. bulletins, offering plates, hymnals.
5. Continue to equip parents to disciple in the home.

☐ **EVALUATE OR ESTABLISH WRITTEN POLICIES AND PROCEDURES PRIOR TO PHASING INTO SMALL GROUPS.**

1. Include best practices for age-appropriate hygiene and cleaning procedures.
2. Limit access to preschool and children's areas.
3. Consider establishing a check-in station outside classroom areas.

4. Label each child's personal items and provide a way to keep these items separated. Consider providing a basket, that can be sanitized, for each child.
5. For babies and toddlers, place diapers, wipes, bottles, etc. in assigned baskets and have parents keep diaper bags with them.
6. Require older preschoolers, children and adults to use alcohol-based hand sanitizer before entering classrooms. Teachers should wash the hands of infants and toddlers as each child arrives.
7. During seasons of highly contagious illnesses:
 - Reduce group sizes and enforce size limitations.
 - Create a plan for sanitizing meeting areas that includes training and accountability.
 - Eliminate snack times to discourage children from touching their mouths.
 - Close play areas outside individual classrooms and close water fountains.
 - Plan activities that do not require physical contact.
 - Prepare and label an activity bag containing crayons, scissors, glue, pencils, etc. for each child, in order to eliminate sharing needed items.
 - Reduce the number of toys in each classroom, leaving only toys that are easily cleaned and sanitized. Remove stuffed toys and animals from classrooms.
8. Post policies in areas with high visibility and email or mail these policies to parents and volunteers, prior to children gathering in small groups on the church campus.

These past few weeks have been a beautiful picture of churches partnering with the home by equipping parents with tools to give them confidence in taking the lead in the spiritual growth journey of their children. As we transition back to our church campuses, we must be careful not to go back to "business as usual" by allowing parents to abdicate to the church their responsibility in the spiritual growth of their children. While the church does share some responsibility for the spiritual growth of children, God's design for the home to be the center of Biblical guidance is clearly mandated in Deuteronomy 6:6-7 and cannot be ignored. We must continue our efforts to equip our parents in their role as the primary disciplers of their children.

PREPARING FOR WORSHIP

Maintain social distancing in worship. Restrictions have been reduced, but social distancing must continue. Consider how this affects the following groups:

1. **Congregations.** Arrange the congregation so families are at least 6-feet apart from other families. Block off certain pews or remove chairs, and utilize guides (staff, ushers and deacons) to direct traffic. These guides should also maintain social distancing.
2. **Worship Leaders.** Model social distancing on the platform. If you can't have your full worship team on the platform and still preserve social distancing, reduce the size of your team, for this season, or alternate smaller groups each week.
3. **Pastors.** Ministers are exceptionally good at "working the room," and they ought to be! You want to greet our attendees, shake their hands, and give them hugs. Now, however, the most loving thing you can do is to not touch others. Greet, smile and wave...but keep your distance. Practice what you preach.

□ ACTIONABLE PLANNING

1. **Eliminate the "meet and greet" fellowship time.** We're all glad to be "a part of the family of God," but we must dispense—for a time—with opportunities for physical greetings. A typical fellowship time in a Baptist worship service could rapidly spread COVID-19 among your congregation.
2. **Don't pass the offering plate.** Passing any physical object (including an offering plate) around a room spreads the germs of anyone who touches the plate. Instead, provide boxes or offering plates at the entrances to your sanctuary. Embrace online giving or encourage members to mail in their tithes and offerings.
3. **Have a plan for baptisms.** This physical, biblical act must continue. And though it is not possible to baptize while social distancing, we can still enact practices to increase safety. Consider baptizing only one person in each service or use chlorine to help lessen the spread of germs. This also may be a perfect time for a baptismal service at the river.
4. **Have an alternate plan for Lord's Supper.** Most Baptists have long-since abandoned a common cup and common loaf during their Lord's Supper observances, and, at least for a time, passing trays of bread and grape juice around our worship center is a problematic. (See "Don't pass the offering plate." above.) Consider individually wrapped Lord's Supper servings, or even have families bring their own bread and juice from home.
5. **Consider other physical objects.** Microphones, hymnals, pew Bibles, worship guides, bulletins, and visitor cards are commonplace in churches. While wonderful tools for worship, they're also exceptional ways to spread germs. Consider alternatives (or regular cleaning and sterilization) for these physical objects, especially if we plan to have multiple services in the same space.
6. **Add services and venues.** The official Tennessee state regulation is to keep your worship space less than 50% full. This is the bare maximum. Each additional service time and venue you offer provides more room for your members to spread out—further preventing the transmission of COVID-19.

7. **Streamline your services.** Make your services meaningful and concise. What is essential, and what is not? (Remember: Many of you will add services and venues. You need more time to clean your facilities in between these services. Some will discourage the use of restrooms. Abbreviating your services will assist with the other adjustments we have been forced to make during this pandemic.)
8. **Continue streaming.** Churches across Tennessee have gained valuable technological expertise by being forced to present their services online. Now is not the time to abandon these practices. Some folks will not return to your services immediately. Others—some of whom you don't even know—will continue to view your services online. Streaming should be a facet of most churches' new normal.
9. **Devise a phase-in plan.** Our president, governor and other leaders have all encouraged a phase-in plan, where we gradually progress towards our new normal. Our worship gatherings ought to be similar. Start with the essentials: preach, pray and sing. Add choirs, worship teams and children's times, for example, later. You may also choose to phase-in Sunday evening gatherings and Wednesday night prayer meetings later. Keep it simple for now.
10. **Delay your choir's return.** Choirs are an invaluable asset for worship. For this season, however, consider postponing their return, unless social distancing can be assured in your choir loft and rehearsal space. (Remember: Singing spreads respiratory droplets farther and more rapidly than ordinary speech.)
11. **Clean. Clean. Clean.** Our worship centers ought to be the cleanest, most sterilized places in our communities. Clean them during the week; then clean them again. If you have multiple services, have a clear and organized plan (and ample time) to clean well, in between every service.
12. **Take attendance.** Since many of our members will continue to worship online, do we count their attendance? If so, how? Do you need to update your church attendance policy and methodology during this season?
13. **Overcommunicate.** Church members are routine oriented. They enter specific doors, sit in the exact same pew, and hug the same necks, week after week after week. Upsetting these routines will be challenging. Write, verbalize, share on social media, send letters, and call...do whatever it takes to help your members understand the new normal for worship gatherings.
14. **Dismiss in an orderly fashion.** Prevent a rush for the exits, during which social distancing won't be feasible. *Your members will naturally enter the sanctuary in a more staggered manner as they arrive. Help them exit similarly. Exit by sections; back to front is likely best.*



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PART 3

UNGATHERING?

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WHAT IF WE NEED TO UNGATHER?

The threat of COVID-19 remains and many churches may come to a point after having gathered that they may need to consider ungathering physically and resuming a primarily virtual ministry. When should that call be made? Part 3 of “Gathering Together Again” addresses actions churches may consider if one or more people have tested positive for coronavirus and have had exposure to others.

If one or more people test positive for COVID-19

1. Determine when the individual(s) attended church.
2. Determine whether the individual(s) have symptoms.
3. Determine when the individual(s) were tested and the test’s outcome.
4. Recognize the individual’s understanding of their right to privacy. Ask for permission, in writing, to share their diagnosis as necessary to alert others of the potential exposure.
5. If the test is positive, trace who the individual(s) may have encountered while at church.
6. Contact those who may have been affected due to that exposure.
7. Determine how extensive the spread may be and the potential impact to the congregation.
8. Decide how best to reduce and manage risks:
 - a. Can church continue with current protocols in place?
 - b. Does the situation merit scaling back ministries to earlier reentry plans?
 - c. Should the church transition for a period back to “virtual church levels?”
9. Communicate quickly and clearly to church members, decisions and updates to reduce misinformation and help people make the best possible decision for them and their families.

Churches and circumstances are unique so it is important to:

1. Evaluate the situation you are facing.
2. Consider the environment (county/city) in which your church is located and draw from local health department information.
3. Make the best decision you can based on what’s best for your church in your context.

The TBMB strongly encourages reviewing Parts 1 and 2 of this Gathering Together Again guide for churches and evaluate the overall readiness of the facility and processes to ensure safe gathering. This document and other resources can be found at TNBaptist.org/reopen.



REMEMBER:
**YOUR ASSOCIATION
AND
STATE CONVENTION TEAMS
ARE HERE TO HELP.**

**Please reach out
with specific questions,
concerns, or ideas.**

**Contact us at (615)373-2255
Or email us at
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*Our thanks to the Florida and Missouri Baptist Conventions
for their contribution to this document.*

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