



# **PREPARING FOR THE ‘NEW NORMAL’**

A Guidebook To Re-Opening & Managing the Post-COVID-19 Christian Church

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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The Drs. Conti have been co-laborers in ministry in Pittsburgh, PA since completing medical school and residency training in 2001, They diligently work to combine their faith in God and love of His people with their clinical training and medical expertise.

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Greetings Brothers & Sisters In Christ,

It's hard to believe that exactly 2 months ago today, there were only 37 deaths in the United States from COVID-19. Businesses and schools were open and we were gathering in houses of worship everywhere and preparing for Passion Week services. Fast-forward to the present and there are nearly 1.5 million cases in the United States, with the death toll approaching 80,000. Despite all of this, we are now being encouraged that the tide of this battle appears to be shifting and that we can be to plan and prepare for a 'new normal' after 'the corona'.

And as we begin to plan, prepare and remain prayerful, we look to the 'counsel and sound judgment' that God promised in Proverbs 8:14, to help us in our planning.

These are the moments and seasons that test the perseverance and our faith of church leaders, where the stakes are high and the decisions may significantly impact the safety, health and wellness of those over whom God has granted stewardship.

Godly leadership is about remaining God-centered and 'other'-oriented. It is about the faithful and diligent pursuit of wisdom and truth. Productive and proactive leadership requires a commitment to shared-decision-making and harnessing the power that comes when likeminded servants of God place His Word and will at the center of their dialogue and decision-making.

As church leaders work through the 'if', 'when' and 'how' elements of re-opening the physical doors of the church building; and begin to process what the 'new normal' will look-like for God's church and His people, they should be encouraged to know that perfection is not a pre-requisite and that God always honors God-driven best-effort. We encourage you to avail yourself of trusted and evidence-based information from credible experts and verifiable resources. Our prayer is that this resource might assist your leadership team in its decision-making.

Remain encouraged and know that nothing catches God by surprise and there is nothing that He has not prepared or positioned His children to handle!

To God Be The Glory!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "The Contis". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Chris & Tracey Conti

## PART 1 | WHEN SHOULD OUR CHURCH RE-OPEN?

There is no cookie-cutter blueprint for the process of re-opening your church. In fact, this is new territory for churches everywhere, and church leaders across denominations are struggling with these questions daily. This booklet provides food-for-thought as you engage in dialogue at the leadership level and hopefully provides assistance in facilitating the conversation.

Because every church is different and the logistical and community dynamics are variable, you will not find a specific recommendation about when to re-open.

Local mandates, congregational characteristics and a host of other factors will impact your decision.

Aside from organizational and emergency management best-practices, your leaders can find encouragement and empowerment in the Biblical best-practices of faith, diligence and prayer. These time and battle-tested elements of our faith have proven their power and effectiveness for millennia, and there is no reason to think that they will fail us now!

I encourage your leadership group to be good stewards of all of the God-scripted resources with which you have been gifted. These include:

- Evidence-based information from clinical & public health experts
- Mandates and guidance from federal, state & local government
- Wisdom of the assembled leadership team
- Power & insight derived from trusted church leaders from other churches
- Strength and support from a prayerful and faithful congregation
- Knowledge, insight & wisdom from the Word of God

**The following questions** should be used as a guide to help your leadership group determine the feasibility of re-opening your church doors, once your state and/or local jurisdiction permit it. Certainly, these are not the only questions that can be asked, but from an emergency management and organizational leadership standpoint, we believe that these are some of the rate-limiting essential questions the group must answer before moving forward:



## PART 2 | HOW SHOULD OUR CHURCH RE-OPEN?

There are a multitude of factors that must be considered when making the decision to re-open the physical doors of your church—requiring considerable amounts of time, energy, due-diligence and prayer.

Now that your leadership group has made the God-centered, faith-focused and evidence-based decision to re-open, there will be yet another level of work and effort required moving forward.

Before we suggest a staged-approach to re-opening, let us first consider **four core considerations** that frame the larger re-opening plan:

- Guidance and evidence-driven decision-making from government leaders
- Guidance from your church's liability insurance carrier
- Survey of the sentiments of the congregation & community at-large
- Implementation logistics & leadership dynamics during the re-opening process

### **Consideration #1—Guidance & Evidence-Driven Decision-Making**

The Federal Government has issued guidance in a document entitled, 'Guidelines For Re-Opening America'. These are important and largely data-driven guidelines and recommendations, however, decisions at the local level flow from information that begins with each state's governor and legislative body. It is therefore imperative that any re-opening plan reference these state guidelines in order to ensure compliance. It is also important to know if any of these guidelines have been handed-off to local/municipal leaders to be sure that your church is fully compliant.

#### **COVID RESOURCES**

##### **PENNSYLVANIA**

<https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/coronavirus/Pages/Coronavirus.aspx>

##### **CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL**

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

## **Consideration #2—Guidance From Your Liability Insurance Carrier**

Despite what government officials and public health experts recommend, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, claims filed against churches and church leaders were experience an alarming rise. This fact does not suggest that we should be engaging in the ‘work of God’ fearfully, but it is simply a fact with which the 21<sup>st</sup> century church must contend. It would be wise for your leadership group schedule a virtual meeting or conference call with a representative of your liability insurance carrier to discuss your plan to re-open from a claims risk standpoint. The weight that you give this discussion and the guidance that it produces is ultimately up to the leadership group, but this information is essential if the leadership group’s decision aims to be fully evidence and information-driven.

## **Consideration #3—Sentiments of the Congregation & Community**

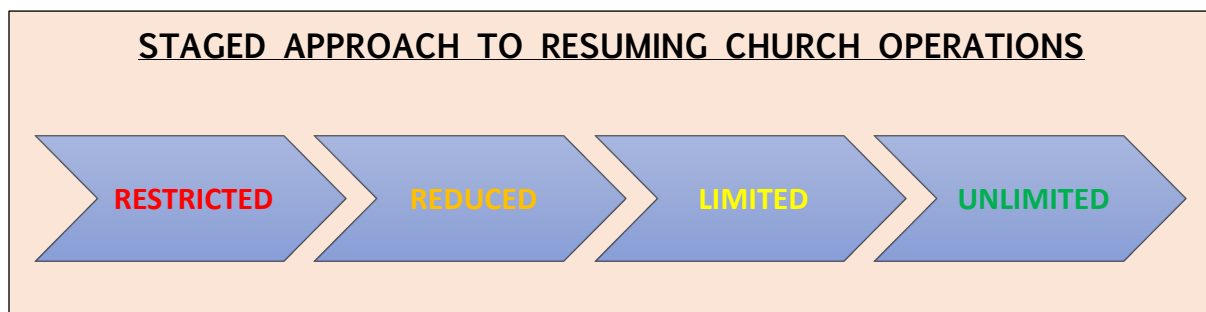
No matter how well-intentioned your leadership group may be, no matter how prayerful the thought-process, the decision to re-open will impact those who have been placed under your charge. For that reason, church decisions of this magnitude should not be made within the vacuum of a small leadership group. Instead, once the decision has been made, it is a good idea to ‘frame’ the conversation and present the decision and the plan to the congregation—and perhaps even to a select group of trusted, thoughtful and engaged community leaders. The decision to include these groups builds trust as well as shared ownership in the decision-making. This does not necessarily mean that the congregation should be allowed to vote-on the leadership’s decision, but including congregants and members of the community allows for conversation for the sake of building consensus and keeping people informed. Even those who may not agree with the decision will likely appreciate having been included in the conversation.

## **Consideration #4—Implementation Logistics & Leadership Dynamics**

### **During the Re-opening Process**

Just as the information regarding the decision-making should not be made in a vacuum, as with many Kingdom-centered tasks, re-opening a church after a global pandemic cannot be done alone! The quickest way to dismantle all of the prayer, due-diligence, data acquisition and planning is to then assign the task of re-opening to one person. Many churches in the past have assigned and often placed similarly daunting transitional tasks squarely on the shoulders of the under-shepherd (the pastor). Many pastors have also assumed that tasks of this significance ‘belong’ solely to them.

Both dynamics are unbalanced, impractical, unhealthy and often result in tension between the pastor and the leadership group, between the leadership group and the congregation and, at times, between the church and the community. Whatever the decision, the message must be clearly communicated to vested shareholders (congregants, church leaders not selected for this task and community leaders) that the decision was a group-driven process. There is no “I” in “team” with respect to most Kingdom work, and the task of developing a plan to re-open the church is no exception. The enormity of this task, from information gathering and processing, to implementation and surveillance requires a mechanism to distribute the responsibilities and the workload. Furthermore, this consideration allows the leadership group to identify others within the congregation or the community who might have interest, energy and/or expertise, that might prove useful in the re-opening planning process. As with all group activities, there should be a clear flow of communication and decision-making, and the group should have an assigned leader who keeps the group accountable and on-task. As the plan progresses, there should be regularly-scheduled sessions for the leadership group to de-brief and troubleshoot as well as regular-interval check-ins with congregants and community members in order to determine the need for re-tooling elements of the plan.



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### **RESTRICTED CHURCH OPERATIONS**

This is the stage where most churches have been for the last 4-8 weeks due to government-mandated ‘stay-at-home’ orders and public health concerns regarding the spread of the novel coronavirus. The rationale driving these state government-driven policies and mandates was for each citizen to individually ‘own’ the shared-responsibility of reducing transmission and spread through social distancing and sheltering-in-place. During **RESTRICTED CHURCH OPERATIONS**, the entire church **campus is closed**, and there is no gathering of staff or congregation in the name of the church either on-campus or off-campus. Only authorized personnel will have limited access to the church campus during this time as determined by the leadership group.



- Church Services                      Online (FB Live, YouTube, Boxcast)
- Campus                                    Closed to public and staff
- Meetings/Groups                      'Virtual' Only
- Pastoral Counseling                    'Virtual' Only
- Special Events                         Canceled
- Staff Location                         100% remote/work-from home
- 'Vulnerable'/At-Risk                 'Virtual' Attendance

### **REDUCED CHURCH OPERATIONS**

This stage in the re-opening process is driven first by state and local government, next by guidance from the church liability carrier, and finally by the deliberations of your leadership group. This is the first tangible step toward returning to on-campus operations. The number of individuals who will be able to gather, in-person, but off-campus, for church-sactioned meetings and gatherings will begin with less than 10; slowly and carefully increasing to up to 25 participants. These gathering should still observe social distancing and face-covering guidelines as well as other hygiene and sanitation practices.

- Church Services                      Online (FB Live, YouTube, Boxcast)
- Campus                                    Closed to public and staff
- Meetings/Groups                      'Virtual' Preferred/In-Person, off-campus (10-25)
- Pastoral Counseling                    'Virtual' Only
- Special Events                         Canceled
- Staff Location                         100% remote/work-from home
- 'Vulnerable'/At-Risk                 'Virtual' Attendance

### **LIMITED CHURCH OPERATIONS**

During this stage in the process to re-open your church, the number of people permitted by state and local jurisdictions has reached 50—while still practicing social distancing, face-covering and hygiene/sanitation practices. Depending on the total number of congregants attending worship, this is the stage when you consider re-opening your campus for worship services.

This is also the stage where most churches, at the very least, may be able to structure worship such that they may require more than one service in order to meet the '50-people or less' mandate. During **LIMITED CHURCH OPERATIONS**, it is perhaps best-practice to still restrict baby dedications (Baptism) and Communion, unless the number of participants remains below 50 **and** Communion does not require gathering at the altar.

- ☉ Process may be 'phased' with respect to on-campus worship services for churches with more than 100 combined staff and discipleship

- Church Services                      Online; **and** on-campus (depending on number)
- Campus                                      Open to public and critical staff
- Meetings/Groups                      In-Person (10-25 or less preferred; larger if space allows)
- Pastoral Counseling                      On-Campus, in-person
- Special Events                              Canceled
- Staff Location                              Critical Staff On-campus; all others remote/at-home
- 'Vulnerable'/At-Risk                      'Virtual' Attendance strongly encouraged

<b>LIMITED CHURCH OPERATIONS</b>			
<small>**MODIFICATIONS BASED ON TOTAL ATENDEES &amp; STAFF**</small>			
Category	Total Number of Staff & Disciples In Attendance		
	Between 101-250	Between 250-500	501+
Church Services	In-Person	In-Person	On-line once capacity reached
Campus	Open	Open	Open until capacity reached
Meetings/Groups	In-Person	In-Person	In-Person, until capacity reached
Pastoral Counseling	In-Person	In-Person	In-Person
Special Events	Consider	Canceled	Canceled
Staff Work Location	Critical Staff On-Site	Critical Staff On-Site	Critical Staff On-Site
'Vulnerable'/At-Risk	'Virtual' Attendance	'Virtual' Attendance	'Virtual' Attendance

## **UNLIMITED CHURCH OPERATIONS**

This is the moment that we continue to pray for—when we can gather without a multitude of restrictions and restraints. It is clear that there will be a 'new normal' associated with this stage despite unlimited access to your church campus and activities. Social distancing will still be advised as will attention to sanitation and hygiene practices, screening safety measures and self-monitoring for symptoms of illness.

- Church Services                      Online; **and** on-campus (depending on number)
- Campus                                    Open to public and staff
- Meetings/Groups                      In-Person (no group size restrictions)
- Pastoral Counseling                    On-Campus, in-person
- Special Events                         Permitted; with attention to sanitation/hygiene
- Staff Location                         All Staff On-campus
- 'Vulnerable'/At-Risk                 Encouraged to attend in-person

This stage pre-supposes that the state and local governments have moved the jurisdiction to the 'green zone' suggesting that there is no appreciable spread of the virus within the general population. This is not likely to occur until the following have **all** been met:

- Effective accessibility to screening testing for all who want to be tested
- Accurate immunology testing to determine exposure and possible immunity
- Safe, effective and widely-available vaccine
- Logistical infrastructure for effective & comprehensive contact-tracing

The timeline for achieving all of these is unclear, suggesting that **LIMITED CHURCH OPERATIONS** will likely be the place from which we navigate for quite some time. Even when **UNLIMITED CHURCH OPERATIONS** have been authorized by local jurisdictions and approved by the leadership group, it is likely that the 'new normal' will still require comprehensive measures such as close attention to social distancing, space capacity management and screening for sick individuals or those with fever.

During the **UNLIMITED CHURCH OPERATIONS** phase, because the 'new normal' will undoubtedly include continued social distancing, it is likely that Communion practices will require modifications that do not require gathering at the altar.

## **CHURCH SIZE DOES MATTER**

The majority of Christian churches in the United States, and around the world for that matter, have less than 100 “active” members who attend worship services and other activities regularly. This current guide is amply suited for those ministries and churches, however approximately 5% of churches will have numbers far greater than that.

This guide can be modified to accommodate ministries with various levels of staffing and discipleship. Your re-opening plan can be fine-tuned depending on the size of the campus and the number of campus buildings. The purpose of this guidebook is to provide a framework for the conversations that will be required to begin the re-opening process for your church.

In addition to the information contained within the guidebook, Tracey and I remain available to any individual or ministry to offer church-specific counsel.

Using this guidebook as a template, you will find that most areas for potential modification will occur within the **LIMITED CHURCH OPERATIONS** stage of your reopening process.

## **CAMPUS SANITATION & HYGIENE CONSIDERATIONS**

Most church campuses have some already-existing mechanism to ensure cleanliness of the sanctuary, alter and other common areas such as laboratories. Additionally, churches that have kitchen facilities are likely to have some form of food handling certification or health department licensure to ensure the cleanliness of food handling and preparation spaces.

The post-COVID-19 era will be a time of sanitation and hygiene hypervigilance.

This will require some of the following elements that your leadership group should consider and develop a strategy to implement.

- creating a visible service log for cleaning of lavatories
- strategic placement of hand sanitizer stations
- removal of fans, hymnals and Bibles from the pews that are often handled by more than one individual
- allowing congregants access to facemasks should they choose to place one on prior to entering campus locations, particularly the sanctuary and/or fellowship hall
- activities such as welcoming church visitors with handshakes, fist bumps or hugs, extending the right hand of fellowship, exchanging the peace, and shared communion cups should be replaced with measures that minimize risk and maximize safety.

## **MANAGING YOUR 'VULNERABLE' POPULATION**

One of the devastating hallmarks of the novel coronavirus is its propensity to seriously impact the elderly. In PA and Allegheny County, over 70% of all cases were in the nursing home population. Though age greater than 65 years places individuals into this 'vulnerable' group, other factors include:

- Pre-existing diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, COPD, asthma
- Immune system compromise due to certain medical conditions, medications and cancer treatments

Your vulnerable population of congregants should be encouraged to remain 'virtual' congregants for the foreseeable future. At the very least, the church must meet its due-diligence burden of informing these individuals of the assumed risk of on-campus attendance should they choose to gather.

## **SAFETY SURVEILLANCE**

Although it is still unclear as to all of the unique characteristics of this disease, and more information is learned everyday, fever and upper respiratory symptoms still remain part of the hallmark symptoms of COVID-19. Though there will never be a perfect or failsafe system to identify and isolate the sick, your church can provide some screening measures, while framing language that clearly encourages those who are sick and/or potentially exposed to stay at home. The leadership will need to determine who is responsible for initial screening of those entering meetings and other gatherings as well as how identified potentially sick participants will be monitored and potential contacts informed. Those responsible for screening will likely employ the simple process outlined below:

- Do you currently have a fever
- Have you been diagnosed with COVID-19 in the last 14-days
- Are you sick now, or have you been in the last 14-days
- Have you been in contact with anyone currently believed to be infected
- Have you traveled outside of the US in the last 14-days
- Will you permit me to check your temperature

Although this process will delay entry into the activity or event, it significantly reduces the risk of sick individuals entering. The church reserves the right to deny admittance to anyone who does not answer these questions or does not allow a temperature scan. There will also be clearly visible signage on all campus entry points describing these measures along with a contact number for anyone who becomes sick after a church-sponsored meeting or event.

### **‘SICK’ RULES & EXPECTATIONS and CONTACT TRACING**

There will be signage clearly notifying congregants and other guests that, in the interest of the health and safety of all, individuals who are sick or recently sick, will not be permitted on the campus. Furthermore, guidelines regarding those who become ill after a church gathering will be clearly communicated. The church will need to develop a plan to initiate ‘contact tracing’; including notifying local public health officials; while attempting to maintain the privacy/confidentiality of the individual who is sick. Since the process of contact tracing requires more than simply identifying and notifying potentially exposed individuals, it is not advised that the church assume this role, but rather best-practice suggests that notifying local public health officials is the best first-step, followed by following their guidance.

### **SPECIAL ACTIVITY—WATER BAPTISM**

Water Baptism is perhaps one of the most sacred rites within the Christian church—a ‘coming-out’ event of sorts, where Christians make a public declaration of their faith. As your leadership groups deliberates regarding a re-opening strategy, this will undoubtedly be a topic of conversation. The Baptism rite is also a source of potential liability with reported claims ranging from falls, drowning and other personal injury to post-traumatic stress and infection. Current guidance from the Centers for Disease Control suggest that novel coronavirus survival in water is low. The risk of transmission in untreated water is ‘very low’ and in chlorine-treated and other treated water sources, ‘extremely low’. That being said, best-practice suggests that those conducting the Baptism rite should wear a mask, and any Baptism candidates not actually in the baptismal pool should wear masks and practice appropriate social distancing. Attendance should be limited to other the participants, and if the participant is a minor, limited to the participant and only one parent/guardian. Your leadership group might work with your audio-visual/tech department to determine the feasibility of streaming Baptism to platforms such as Facebook Live or You Tube.

## **SPECIAL CHURCH ACTIVITY-- COMMUNION**

The practice of serving and receiving Communion varies across Christian denominations. In the era of COVID-19, Communion rites should be administered with great care. Churches that have typically gathered participants at the altar or have shared the cup among participants you strongly consider abandoning this practice in place of a practice that maintains social distancing and careful attention to unprotected contact between participants. There are commercially available products that combine a waiver and small cup into a single dispensable 'pack' such that each participant receives their own individually-wrapped Communion elements. Furthermore, participants should not gather at the altar, but should remain on the pews and receive the elements where they are seated.

## **BE VIGILANT & FLEXIBLE**

The post-COVID church, like all of us, must be viewed as a work in progress. As we continue to learn more about this virus, recommendations and best practices may be modified. Not only should we anticipate this truth, but we must adopt language that prepares our discipleship as well. The language and the optics should not imply expertise, but should convey a best-effort attempt to create a physical and spiritual 'safe-space' where people might encounter God. The leadership group should lead by example, faithfully trusting God, while also finding the healthy and necessary balance between staying informed and the emotional dysfunction created by information overload. Leadership should have answers to common and expected questions already prepared, even if the answer is 'we don't know'.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS & ENCOURAGEMENT**

This now marks our 16th year in organized gospel ministry work, and my 10th year in pastoral ministry. We have no doubt that God has called, equipped and positioned us to assist our brothers and sisters at this moment and season in the history of His church.

The hope is that this document provides a guidance framework for your church and its leadership as you wrestle collectively with the decision to re-open and the logistical and practical challenges that re-opening will create.

Remain prayerful, faithful and encouraged, knowing that our God has already assured our victory. While we navigate this challenging chapter, remember that God has already written a script for our churches that has already equipped her and her leaders with everything needed to survive and triumph.

We encourage you to share this document with anyone who you believe might benefit, and we remain always-available to my brothers and sisters in Christ to help them prepare for our “next“. As information changes, we will make appropriate modifications to this document.

We will keep you all lifted in prayer as collectively we continue our faithful forward-movement, confident that God knows what He is doing and His proven track-record affirming that His plan is perfect and that He can do anything but fail!

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