

# Why Reopening a Church is Different

Planning for the future during COVID-19 presents challenges for the church unlike any other. How will we lead in a time of change?

*By Rev. Alex A. Shanks*

Everywhere we turn, people are talking about reopening. Should churches simply follow the same guidelines regarding reopening as other institutions? I believe there are practical principles and theological reasons why reopening our church campuses requires a different kind of thinking. The church shouldn't be looking to sidestep the guidelines. The church shouldn't be simply reacting to what others are doing. The church should be leading the way by modeling a method of safety for others to follow.

## **PRACTICAL PRINCIPLES**

**Churches need to open their campuses faithfully, not just safely.** Churches will need to consider how the changes required to reopen safely could adversely impact the nature and integrity of worship and ministry. Our expressions of church need to reflect the values and essence of who God has called the church to be. Churches should ask: What are the essential worship elements that express who we are and who we believe God to be, and how can we ensure those are done authentically in this new model? Figuring out how to faithfully do ministry in a world of social distancing while maintaining virtual church options for those who can't attend in person, will require a new wave of ingenuity and adaptation. *Some churches may choose to reopen their church campuses much later in order to open faithfully.*

**Churches are built primarily on trust.** People don't regularly attend a church where they don't trust their leaders to make healthy and informed decisions. If you lose the trust of your congregation during a reopening of your campus, you lose an essential glue that holds the organizational life together. One can only imagine the impact of losing the trust of the general public by being the next tragic headline. You may be concerned about people going to the church next door who is opening sooner than you are. *In the long run, people will attend churches based on trust and a feeling of safety, rather than when they reopened.*

## **Church finances should not be a primary consideration in the timing of reopening.**

Reopening the church campus does not mean giving will increase. Giving may or may not increase. Churches are not like businesses that had no recent income. Many churches have gained new giving units through online sources. Be skeptical of those who think reopening a church building will solve financial issues. Giving levels may be more impacted by the unemployment rates and the re-prioritization of family budgets in an uncertain time. If your church is fragile financially, reopening is not likely a solution – especially considering the costs related to reopening buildings safely. *Giving will more likely increase as we make faithful decisions.*

**Reopening churches will require the building of a new culture.** Churches are notoriously ineffective at getting people to follow new rules and guidelines. Even when we do, we always have an exception (picture the person in your family who continues to do things the way they have always done them despite all your efforts to change their habits!). Churches lack an enforcement mechanism and are often too kind for our own good. We need a new culture marked by a willingness to put the safety of others ahead of our personal preferences. We need people willing to call someone out in love when they see a new protocol slipping. The pastor cannot be expected to be the sole guardian of safety. Safely reopening will only be possible through a mass commitment to new norms and a culture that is constantly asking: “How can we help not make someone else sick?” *Reopening will require training a cadre of leaders who will champion a new culture of doing church.*

**We can't return to the church as it used to be.**

This is not possible. Nor is it responsible. To return to the exact same church we left mid-March would not honor the learnings we have gained and the ways we have adapted. Returning to the way things used to be would fly in the face of the Jesus who warned against pouring new wine into old wineskins. We are creatures of habit and averse to change, so we will have to make every effort to create a new model of church. How will we welcome and engage the new people with whom we have connected? How will we incorporate new technologies? Additionally, how will we honor and give space to express the incredible loss and grief experienced in this time? To return to church without acknowledging the grief and loss of this time would be the worst kind of denial in the very place that should be modeling healthy grief work. We all want to go back to church, but we cannot go back to the same church we left. *Instead of returning to the same church, we should be relaunched as a new church!*

**THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

**A church is not primarily a building.** The church is a people on mission together. Unlike others, churches have not been closed; rather we are

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preparing to reenter our buildings. In this time, we have been the church gathered virtually and distributed in service and mission. There is no theological congruence to the way God designed the church if our next steps to being the church are focused only on reopening our facilities. There are a variety of ways to connect to God and our neighbors prior to the reopening of our buildings. *We should remain focused on being the church and not just having church worship and ministries on campus.*

**The body of Christ must honor the most vulnerable parts of the body as much as any other (1 Corinthians 12).**

In many ways, we are called to honor the vulnerable above all others. What does it say theologically about us if we open in a way that excludes the vulnerable? How do we need to adapt when it is the clergy person who is vulnerable? Didn't we read somewhere about the first shall be last and the last shall be first? In this season, what does it mean to be, as Charles Wesley wrote in his hymn, “united by your grace”?

Christ's primary call is to serve others – especially the vulnerable, the weak, and the poor. Our reopening plans are not about what is best for the management of our institution, but what is best for the common good and greater community. *This is not a time to focus primarily on what we may be sacrificing by not gathering, but how we are serving and loving all our neighbors by not gathering too soon.*



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### SO WHAT DO WE DO FROM HERE?

Whatever we do, **churches should seek to exceed the basic health guidelines.** Churches are not the exception. By understanding all the ways the virus is still spreading, churches can take appropriate steps to mitigate risk. This includes following all the best guidance around limiting the size of gatherings, cleaning practices, social distancing, and the wearing of masks. The church will need to alter elements of worship like receiving communion, collecting the offering, the greeting time, and public singing. (Note: You can find the latest guidance on all the practical things to consider in reopening UMC campuses in Florida [here](#)). Any church, regardless of size and location, can reopen safely and faithfully if it will thoughtfully take its time, adapt and innovate.

**Here are five things to keep in mind as you make your plans to reopen:**

**Build a healthy church team** to do the careful work around reentering your buildings and relaunching ministry and worship. Include people who will see your blind spots. Be sure the team addresses what you will do when people ignore the guidelines, or you learn of a possible infection in your faith community.

**Learn as much as you can about the science of how the virus spreads.** If all you read is the guidelines, that is all you will be able to follow. If you begin to understand the science, it will push you to exceed guidelines and see the dangers unique to your context. Continue to look for best practices that you can implement in your church setting.

**Communicate clearly and often.** Plan for the people and circumstances who will need you to communicate even more clearly and more often. Be prepared to clearly articulate the guidelines and answer the question of “why we are reopening our buildings at this time.” Use stories and visuals wherever possible. Helpful communication increases trust.

**Go slow.** This is not a race to reopen. Give space for thoughtful reflection on your values. Consider how much time it will really take to carefully prepare your space and train your team.

**Keep the faith.** You won’t think of everything. You can’t. But you do serve a God who is with you now and is calling you into this new reality with hope and confidence. Our ultimate faith is in a God who is able to do immeasurably more than we could ask or imagine (Ephesians 3). God will guide us as we make space to truly hear, individually and corporately, from the God who is faithful – no matter when we are able to reopen.

As we reopen our buildings, may we seek to be in God’s time and not our own. We follow a God of hope and resurrection who knows all about making all things new (Isaiah 43:18). That is where our ultimate faith lies. Remember, the church has never closed. The church remains open, even as we don’t physically gather in our building. We do all of this so that we might fully love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Mark 12:31).

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