

**Converge North Central exists to come alongside church leadership
as your trusted connection
toward focusing you from distraction to direction.**

A New Thing Springing Up (Isaiah 43:19)

See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

Over the past weeks, our world has changed. Our country has changed. Our neighborhoods have changed. How we do church has changed.

Our God, who sat on the throne prior to COVID-19, sits on the throne today and will still be on the throne tomorrow. His Bride is still on mission, making more and better disciples in the places that God has called us.

The disruptions and distractions are many. Economic, emotional, relational, and physical are just a few ways which impact our churches. As pastors and leaders in the church, just when you think you are beginning to grasp a current new reality, something changes and the landscape shifts again. The valued resource that guided you seven weeks ago seems dated as there is a new set of challenges to overcome, questions to answer, and decisions to make.

For many of our churches, one of the questions that now, or soon will be asked, is **“When allowed by our state, can we begin gathering for worship?”** This document is to help you and your church leadership answer that, and other related questions. Each church is different in its own culture and makeup, as are the guidelines, perceptions and expectations for each state, region, and community.

This “A New Thing” document is far from exhaustive, but it raises important questions and offers helpful insights. Yet, it is intended to be one side of the same coin as a parallel document “New Now.” Be sure to **read and reference** the key questions in that resource. Finally, on our webpage we also have links to many other resources (updated weekly) on this topic: <https://converge.org/north-central>

Each of these resources offer tangible steps, yet we recognize that every church is different. Use what you can. Improve where you can. Familiarize yourself with the different issues and topics with your team and leadership. We believe these resources will help you and your church wade with confidence and conviction into decisions and direction through this stage of ministry.

State Guidelines

In Minnesota and Iowa, it appears that the opportunity for churches to re-engage in public worship will be done through different stages. The starting point in any consideration should be a clear understanding of the government guidelines for public worship gatherings in your state.

Anticipate a “phased-in return.” Individuals in your congregation have different needs and each is at a different place when it comes to their perspective and response to the pandemic and the opening up of organizations such as church. The elderly and vulnerable will most likely be the most hesitant. Others might be coming from the perspective of an abundance of caution or deep anxiety.

Social distancing will also be a part of a phased-in return. Social distancing standards will not be turned off like a light switch. Remember how social distancing was phased into existence? Expect the same as it is being phased out.

As the situation has been in the past, it most likely will continue to be in the future – fluid.

At this point, we believe that a church should carefully consider when it will begin holding public services again. Just because your state government has allowed for groups to meet, that doesn't mean you should. Prayerful and thoughtful consideration should be given as to what the guidelines are and where the guidelines are heading. Necessary steps for the church to consider, develop, and implement should satisfy the state's guidelines, but we must also ensure the safety of those who attend. Begin a period of planning and preparation. What does it look like if the church can gather in groups of 10? What are the steps needed to prepare for meeting in groups of 50? What do you anticipate for your church when you can gather in groups of 100 or more?

Standard Operating Procedures

- Online Worship Service

We believe your online worship service will/should continue to be a part of your church's "standard operating procedure" for at least the immediate future. As discussed above, even though there is legal permission to return to a public worship service, there will be many who will not return immediately. The social behavior of gathering for physical corporate worship will be slow for many in your congregation and the community you seek to reach. For these people, the ministry and content you put online will continue to be the core of their church experience until they feel comfortable to come to the building. It's not just the online service that needs to be sustained. It would be wise to continue online spiritual care as well as a number of virtual small group options. The potential high value is seeking to find new ways for your people to connect with your virtual community as this increases your online communities sense of connectedness.

- Hospitality

Greeters, Ushers and Guest Service teams need to be restricted to accommodate social distancing. Consideration should be given to:

- Wearing face masks? Gloves? Will gloves and masks be available for attenders?
- Consider having the greeters, in gloves and masks, open the doors while standing behind the door so people do not have to touch the door.
- Who are your volunteers? Will they be the same? Do you expect the older and at risk individuals to continue serving?
- Will you initiate that conversation with volunteers? How and when will they be trained to understand the new protocols?

If your gathering previously included a "greeting time?" This needs to be eliminated or adapted to reflect health standards.

Do you offer coffee or food before, during, or after the service? Current best practices would say to suspend this aspect of your hospitality ministry.

- Worship Space

Seating in your worship space will be very important in light of social distancing. It's easy to think of a 6 ft buffer to your left and right, but it also includes in front and behind.

- Anticipate need to remove 50% of your capacity.
- Will you need to add more services to help people spread out? If so, how will you manage that to avoid too many people overcrowding one service?
- Will you trust individuals to self-police their 6 ft buffers or will you need to remove or rope off chairs?

Children's and Nursery ministry will be difficult to do in light of social distancing as well as perception. The Center for Disease Control just released reopening guidelines for public spaces, this directly impacts childcare in churches and is very important for you to read: <http://cdn.cnn.com/cnn/2020/images/04/30/reopening.guidelines.pdf>

If you use a self-check in system, how will you maintain a sanitize check at the station?
How could your worship space be set up to accommodate larger family clusters?

Does your facility have a number of spaces and the ability to broadcast in other rooms to accommodate more people in worship? Do you have enough classrooms or volunteers to have nursery and children's ministry in smaller groups to meet social distancing guidelines?

When it comes to passing the offering plate or the communion tray, current guidelines would speak to offering boxes, promotion of online giving, and adjustments as to how the Lord's Supper is administered by using sealed elements.

Does a part of your service include the passing out of a bulletin or some other handout? This should be reconsidered, even leaving a stack out for people to take on their own is discouraged during this time.

What items are in the pews and under the seats?

- Things such as visitor cards, pencils, brochures, pew Bibles, and hymnals should be removed or regularly sanitized. If they are sanitized, this should be communicated.
- To replace information gathered from visitor and regulars on cards and Scripture references, smart phones could be utilized.

Regrettably, there are a number of segments that are occasionally part of our corporate worship that "best practices" would dictate they should be postponed until further loosening of social distancing guidelines. These include:

- Baptism, prayer counseling following a service, parent-child dedication, and commissioning services, laying on of hands.

- Questions to Process:

- Safety/Social Distancing

- What will your common spaces look like to reflect social distancing and guidelines? Will you remove tables and other areas that previously encouraged people to socialize and hang out?
- What will be your cleaning and sanitizing routines? What areas will be sanitized? How and when will those cleaning be trained and when will these tasks be completed?
- What are the areas that are frequently touched? Doors. Railings. Countertops. Bathrooms. Who will do it? When will it be done?
- How will you communicate to attenders the steps that are being taken? Consider putting signs in bathrooms saying when the last time it was sanitized.
- Will there be hand sanitizer stations? How many do you need? Where will they be? Where will you purchase the sanitizer and other cleaning supplies?
- The CDC, provides these guidelines for cleaning and disinfecting:
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>
- How will you direct the flow and movement of people to assist in social distancing? What signage is needed? How will it be communicated?

- Nursery and Children’s Ministry
 - When do you anticipate having a nursery and children’s options during worship? Who will staff these ministries? How and when will they be trained?
 - Can you reduce the number of children per room and arrange the seating where they cannot touch one another? Will you prohibit snacks?
 - Will teachers wear gloves and/or face masks? Will the children be encouraged to wear face masks?
 - What activities will be planned that don’t promote touching or the sharing of things such as arts and craft supplies and toys?
 - Midweek children gatherings, such as Awana, should be adapted to reflect social distancing and sanitizing guidelines and proactively communicated to parents.

- Small Groups and Youth Groups
 - Adult and youth small groups and gatherings should reflect the same guidelines as discussed for smaller groups with proper social distancing protocols.
 - The sharing of food should be prohibited at a church-sponsored group, even in a home setting. These steps, along with sanitizing steps should be communicated clearly.
 - Is there a plan to build upon the momentum of returning and increase the number of small groups? How will your pre-pandemic small groups be different than your post-pandemic groups? What further training can/should you now provide?
 - Because of the vulnerability of COVID-19 with older people, face-to-face gatherings of seniors should be postponed.
 - Find volunteers within your church who might help contacting and demonstrate care to those who can’t or don’t choose to attend.

- Events
 - Approaching Vacation Bible School season, what are your alternatives to a large gathering? Would it be possible to decentralize your VBS to a smaller Backyard Bible Club format? Are there other creative options?
 - How will best practices in social distancing and other guidelines be followed?
 - Retreats, men’s and women’s events, picnics, potlucks, and other social gatherings such as baby showers and all-church spring cleaning days, will have to be adapted to meet the guidelines and protocols in place at that time.

Training

- One of the themes in the discussion of reopening is training.
 - Who will develop and communicate the new procedures and protocols, whether it be for those who greet, those who sanitize, those who lead a group, and more.
 - How will this training happen?
- Staff
 - A plan is needed to prepare for public gatherings.
 - But just as essential, communicating that plan so that all of your staff are crystal clear on all the new protocols and procedures.
- Volunteers
 - **Recruit volunteers now**, regardless of knowing the exact date of the reopening.
 - There will be a need for them to recommit to their volunteer role, re-engage in the ministry of the church, and the willingness to be retrained.
 - Some loyal volunteers may choose to not re-engage as a volunteer at this time.
 - Appreciation, understanding, and grace should be strongly communicated.
 - Plan for more volunteers than you might think you need.

Messaging

- Integral to all the considerations and steps for returning to public gatherings is communication and messaging.
- For regular attenders, what are the most important things you want to communicate?
- For the first-time visitor (digitally or in person) what do they need to hear and know?
 - Things to consider are:
 - A clear plan of opening in phases
 - What ministries will be available and what ministries will not
 - New protocols to let people know you've done all you can to keep the facility clean and sanitized. It should include every aspect of the building and the ministries. (Then, you actually need to do it!)
 - Reminder of social distancing guidelines
 - The continuation of online services and groups
 - Reiterate to the church that you want people feeling ill, even if it's not COVID-19 symptoms, to stay home. This is to ensure those who come back feel confident and comfortable.
 - Where to find updates and more information (social media platforms and church website)
 - Words of hope
- Develop a schedule of communication using a variety of communication formats (social media, email, phone calls, snail mail)
 - You may want to consider church surveys like these two options:
 - <https://blog.lifeway.com/newsroom/2020/04/23/lifeway-research-develops-free-tool-for-churches-to-help-plan-for-reopening/>
 - <https://gregatkinson.com/10-questions-to-ask-your-congregation-before-you-reopen/>
 - Both are tools to gather feedback from the congregation as to their readiness and expectations of gathering for public worship.
- To the larger community of which the church is a part of, you may want to target specific communications to them.
 - The message of this communication could include not only that the church is “open,” but it is offering a message of hope in a way that promotes social distancing and follows the government guidelines.
 - It's also a good opportunity to promote the church's online presence.
 - The method for this message can be ads or columns in local newspapers, signage outside the church, or social media.
- Signage
 - There is an obvious need for signage including directions, assurance, and reminders for those in the building.
 - Directions relate to changes made in how people move in and around the building to support social distancing, where children should be, how seating is being addressed in the worship space.
 - Assurance is to let people know the steps that are taken to keep them safe through a clean and sanitized environment.
 - Reminders can range from social distancing to what is and isn't taking place during the time people are gathered.
 - Signage is also needed outside the facility.
 - Not just to help with the flow of people, but it's also an opportunity to remind people of the church's online presence and other social media platforms.

Opportunities

- Even amidst these guidelines which can be restrictive, opportunities for new, and meaningful ministry exist.
- The mission of the church continues!
 - Is your leadership team thinking through the mission of your church during this time?
 - What ministry opportunities have come as a result of COVID-19? Where do you see the greatest need in your community? How might your church meet that need?
 - People will still be hurting, grieving, in need, and asking questions after all of this.
 - The message of Jesus still offers hope and life. Though methods and even some ministries have changed, the mission Jesus gives us remains.
- Evangelism is still the heartbeat of the church. It may look different in some ways, but the Good Shepherd is still looking for His sheep outside of the fold. How have the last few months increased the spiritual conversations in your community? How will your church respond in reaching out? What sermons need to be preached? What small group topics need to be taught. What training needs to take place?
- Be the Church. Not just on Sunday and Wednesday night, but what new ways have you discovered for the church and it's people to be active every day of the week.
 - During this season we were forced to go online and it has reminded us that the "church" is decentralized and is relevant in homes and relationships beyond Sunday.
 - What are three things from the past months that you could leverage and build upon to see the church "be the church" in new and dramatic ways?
- Community Engagement has taken on a new meaning.
 - How can you serve the community with a Gospel engagement?
 - Contact the local police, fire, and political leaders to discover the needs in the community.
 - Food donations are always needed at food shelves.
 - What would it look like to serve the first responders and those on the front line? What groups need special attention?
 - Is there a nurse in your congregation your church could adopt their unit by delivering meals, praying, or something else?
 - Whether it be the person at the grocery store or the person who brings you food at the curbside, ask them how you might pray for them.
 - From here on, how could you train your volunteers who interact in these different community engagements to naturally be able to start spiritual conversations.
- Pastoral Care and Counseling
 - This will always be a part of ministry and could potentially increase. Whether it be caring for seniors who might feel even more separation to those who are dealing with anxiety, isolation, and depression there is a need for care.
 - Does your church have ability and capacity to meet an increased counseling need?
 - Are there counselors, social workers, or therapists in your congregation who could be mobilized?
 - How current is your list of counselors and therapists for referrals?
 - As more and more lives are touched by COVID-19, there will most likely be an increase in the need for grief counseling.

- Compounding the loss of a loved one may be the inability for contact during the final days and the limitations that might influence how a funeral service occurs.
- The increased pressure resulting from social distancing, economic challenges, and the uncertainty that lies ahead may result in a rise of addictive and abusive behaviors.
 - There are already spikes in people accessing pornography, abusing alcohol and drugs, as well as an increase in domestic violence.
 - Those who have experienced a loss of income may be facing financial challenges. What are some of the ways the church can respond?
 - Provide marriage enrichment opportunities. Make financial planning available and utilize curriculum such as Financial Peace University.
 - Communicate the willingness and the ways the church is seeking to help in these areas.

Church Board

- How does your church's bylaws and constitution work in a COVID-19 world?
 - If you have a congregational meeting, how will you carry that out if there are size limitations to your gatherings? How will voting take place? How will decisions be made that require congregational approval?
 - Review the church's documents to see what might be able to be accomplished virtually.
 - How might areas be streamlined and improved? How can you use technology to accomplish the congregational business of the church?
- Revisit your church budget to assess the needs and realities of this new normal.
- Review the giving for the last 3 months and look for trends and trajectories.
- What needs to be eliminated, reallocated, or added? To begin this process, ask:
 - What are the basic necessities to operate our facility and pay staff?
 - Are there new streams of revenue we could explore?
 - Are there any cash reserves?
 - Do you have an understanding of consistent givers whose economic situation has changed?
 - Are you satisfied with your online giving platform?
 - What ministry areas need more funding? Which ones need less? Which ones may need to be eliminated?
 - What are your budget needs to not just sustain, but improve and leverage your online presence?
 - What budgeted areas may not be necessary post COVID-19?
 - Are we funding areas that don't align with our mission?
 - How can we thank those who are generous?
 - If your budget and giving is solid, how might you bless and be generous to others churches or organizations?
- Mid-Term Planning might include a discussion on adjusting and aligning staff.
 - Is a staff member taking on a greater role in terms of technology and social media?
 - Would it be appropriate to adjust their duties and responsibilities?
 - If you were planning on hiring for a new position reconsider the job description and whether it is still relevant to your current needs. If the need and finances are still there, will you consider engaging in the hiring process?

- What impact will COVID-19 have on the events on your church calendar from a budget perspective? Not just for the remainder of 2020, but look ahead to 2021 anticipating how our communities will still be operating in the shadow of the pandemic. Consider also the clarity and refocusing on current ministry needs.

Personal Soul Care

- Pastor, amidst all of these challenges and the rapid fire changes with which you are involved in, don't neglect yourself and your relationships.
- Mediate on these thoughts from Pastor Ed Stetzer found in I Kings 19:5-21 and the story of Elijah and care for your soul during these days.

Rest and Eat

All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat."...He ate and drank and then lay down again. (v. 5-6)

Get Perspective

Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. (v. 8)

Be Real

"What are you doing here, Elijah?...I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty...I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." (v. 10)

Listen For God

The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord,"...And after the fire came a gentle whisper. (v. 11,12)

Find Community

Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal...Elijah went from there and found Elisha...Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his servant. (v. 18,19,21)

This crisis has changed us forever. It has forced us to be more creative, innovative, and adaptive than ever before. It has helped us identify more authentic ways to exist as well as given us a greater appreciation for things we once took for granted. Though we all long to return to how it used to be, we know that won't happen. But, that will be okay if we let what we have experienced make us better. We've been forced to learn new things in a crucible. Let's not stop learning. Our new normal will be different than our old normal. And while we grieve that, let us not stay in that grief for we understand that **God is doing a new thing**.