

Reopening Our Church Buildings

A pressing question on the minds of pastors and church leaders today is related to the reopening of church buildings for worship. The question actually has two aspects that need to be answered: when should we reopen, and what needs to be done to reopen safely? The following contains the state guidance for reopening and a number of ideas for consideration that have been compiled by Oklahoma Baptists' Church Resources and Church Relations groups. In keeping with Oklahoma Baptists' strategic patterns of being pastor connected and associational partnered, the ideas have been provided by pastors across our state and gathered with the help of our directors of missions.

General Ministry Encouragements

- Reopening should be viewed as an ongoing process rather than a one-time event.
- Although you are permitted to open on May 1, decisions about reopening should be based on your local congregation's context.
- Decisions should be made in conjunction with key church leaders and additional members who can give valuable insight to the decision.
- Decisions should be consistent with federal, state and local government guidelines (In areas where local authorities have not made a statement, consider seeking input from your area).

Specific Guidelines/Requirements from the State of Oklahoma

The State of Oklahoma is permitting churches to choose whether to open for in-person meetings or worship. Churches may reopen under some restrictions as soon as May 1. For worship, every other row or pew must be left open. Churches are not yet permitted to provide nursery areas. Individuals over 65 or part of a vulnerable population must continue following safer-at-home guidelines during this phase. Churches must adhere to CDC-recommended social distancing and sanitations protocols. More specific guidance for churches will be coming from the Oklahoma Department of Commerce. Visit www.okcommerce.gov/covid19/ to view the current "Open Up and Recover Safely" plan and to watch for upcoming specific guidance for churches.

Key Considerations Prior to the First Gathering

1. Consider measures to protect the church family.

- Do we have adequate amounts of hand sanitizer and dispensers?
- Have we adequately cleansed and sanitized the entire facilities?
- Will we require and/or make facemasks available?
- Have we identified all the necessary health guidelines for all in attendance?
- Example questions for attendees:
 - Have you been in an area outside our state or contiguous states in the last 14 days?
 - Have you been in contact with anyone who has been diagnosed with Covid-19 in the last 14 days?
 - Have you had a fever, shortness of breath or been ill in the last 14 days?
 - Are you a member of the vulnerable or high-risk population?

2. Consider how the gathering space should be arranged to provide for social distancing.

3. Consider continuing online services for those who are uncertain or unable to attend.

4. Consider conducting worship service in an alternative venue (e.g. drive-in church, outdoor lawn church).

5. Consider rotation of members in live services by alphabet using last names (last names beginning with A-I, J-Q, R-Z) based on the number of services you provide to allow for social distancing.

6. Consider the goal of the first regathering of the church family.

- Is the goal just to get back together in the church? (This goal allows gathering in Phases 1-3)

- Is the goal to celebrate the gathering of the church? (This goal may postpone gathering until a larger group can gather and social distancing restrictions are lessened, thus allowing for a large “Welcome Back” type service)

7. What other groups will be allowed to gather and what guidelines will they need to adhere to?

Key Considerations for Your First Gathering

When gathering, consideration should be given to:

- Plan how you will limit handouts (e.g. announcements, hymnals, orders of service, and other bulletin information).
- Maintaining social distance and sanitation requirements with the presence of young children in the worship service.
- Plan how you will clean common areas between services.
- Display signage that would discourage hand shaking, and/or other greetings that require physical touch.
- Identify which doors can remain propped open in order to limit the number of people touching the handles.

When worshipping, consideration should be given to:

- The benefits and health concerns of the congregation concerning expressions of worship (For example, “should we sing or not?” “how do we take the offering?” and “how do we conduct the invitation?”).
- How you will arrange the meeting area so that the six foot social distancing can take place (For example, possibly ushering people to appropriate seats).

When dismissing, consideration should be given to:

- Possibly staggering the dismissal so that there is not the creation of an unintentional crowding the social distancing space of individuals.
- What gathering in large group signals to other groups in the church (For example, questions like, “should youth group start back?” and “should small groups begin meeting together?” will arise quickly after your first service).

Helpful Links & Resources

Government Resources

- “Open Up and Recover Safely” plan - www.okcommerce.gov/covid19/
- CDC Cleaning guidelines - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>
- CDC Social distancing - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/social-distancing.html>

Ministry Helps

- Questions Your Church Should Answer - <https://kenbraddy.com/2020/04/18/20-questions-your-church-should-answer-before-people-return/>
- Frisco Baptist Association Resource - <https://storage.snappages.site/G6XWGX/assets/files/COVID-19-Stage-1.pdf>
- LifeWay’s Facts & Trends Article - <https://factsandtrends.net/2020/04/22/what-your-church-must-know-before-reopening-your-building/>

Church Reopening Communications Examples

- First Baptist Church, Newcastle - <https://us15.campaign-archive.com/?u=27f7aad9ce31e71c61a98b033&id=c6372bd1d6>
- Immanuel Baptist Church, Shawnee - https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.cloversites.com/60/60097b02-afec-448c-8826-c79c28aacb11/documents/Reopen_statement_FINAL.pdf

The preceding information resource does not constitute legal or health advice.

Learn more about Oklahoma Baptists' response to COVID-19 - <https://www.OklahomaBaptists.org/Coronavirus>