



# Reopening Church Buildings

*A resource page for the congregations of the Presbytery of Northern NY*

*[Special thanks to The Rev. Karen Chamis, Resource Presbyter for the Presbytery of Cayuga Syracuse, for developing the majority of this content]*

Two months ago, our congregations made the difficult decision to close their physical doors. For some this meant that the members of the congregation would continue to connect informally. For other congregations this created an urgency that led to new language like “Facebook Live” and Zoom. Within the span of 48 hours, folks were online. The “frozen chosen” were on fire!

Governor Cuomo announced that Phase One of opening NYS could begin on May 15. On May 18 he further noted that churches will fall into Phase four. That means churches cannot open their doors before June 26 [6 weeks from the date of announcement, since each phase lasts a minimum of 2 weeks]. The COM on May 19, 2020 took action to request ALL SESSIONS work through this document together BEFORE considering any in person gatherings. When that time comes, we need to be prepared on several levels. Let us use these gifts of time and experience to be deliberate in our planning.

## **Not all of us will agree on when it will be safe to return.**

- Let us enact mutual forbearance and respect with one another as we each bring our own context and concerns to this issue.
- Let us remember that we are each members of the Body of Christ, deeply connected to one another. Our primary concern therefore, is the health and well-being of our congregation and the community in which it serves.
- Let us remember that just as this decision may vary from congregation to congregation, individuals will also need to make their own choice on when it is safe to return. How we respond to the needs of these folks is important.

**The body that makes the decision of whether or not to reopen the church is the Session.** Each congregation’s situation and context are unique; discernment be made prayerfully and faithfully, utilizing data that is grounded in facts and not opinion. In addition to the needs and desires of the community, there needs to be an assessment of practices as well as the physical space. The intent of this resource is to give church leadership some tools to discern their own path forward.

---

## Think **PHASES** and **PROCESS**

- The decision to open our buildings is not the same as a decision to return to our previous activities. Don’t feel bound by previous schedules – we are in a new place, and that may mean there are new needs.
- Reopening will need to happen on several levels. Each of these will need to have its own set of phases, and driven by separate questions.
- Part of your conversation needs to be what triggers each Phase, and what triggers if you need to take a step back (or two!).

**Example:**

*Pre-virus, the Saints Preserved Presbyterian Church had worship at 10 a.m., with children heading off to Sunday school after the Children's message. Following worship was a Fellowship Hour with folks rotating hosting responsibilities. Adult Bible School was held at 9 am. on Sundays as well as a Wednesday group that meets at the church. Choir rehearsed on Thursday nights. Other meetings (Session, Deacons, Committees) occurred sporadically throughout the month. The pastor held regular office hours on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.*

**Option A:** Gather physically for worship on Sunday mornings (with precautions in place including roping off pews and providing sanitizer and masks) without a choir or Sunday School. Bible studies may continue to meet via Zoom, but will hold off meeting together in person until September. Fellowship Hour will be placed on hold. (Doughnuts are hard to eat with masks.)

**Option B:** Don't gather physically for worship until September. Instead, the congregation is invited to meet in regular small groups to meet for worship in backyards and parks. A bulletin is prepared for folks to use, and the sermon is watched on YouTube (or read) followed by discussion afterward. In addition to this, there are support groups established via conference call and/or zoom for those who are unemployed.

**Option C:** A variation of the two – with people meeting in the sanctuary for worship only twice a month for the summer, transitioning to another phase in the fall if possible. Or not meeting at all in person during the summer, and transitioning in the fall, etc.

\*\*\*

Let's say the Session adopts Option A. There are a variety of technical questions that come with this option (Communion? Baptisms? Greeters?, etc.) and they may also have various phases based on increased trust that to be together in community is safe. For instance...

**Collecting the Offering**

Phase One: No physical collection. Parishioners are encouraged to give online.

Phase Two: An offering plate is placed at the entrance to the sanctuary, and folks are invited to present their gifts at the end of the service.

Phase Three: The plates are up front, and people walk forward to offer their gifts, etc.

**Choir/Music**

Phase One: Just organ/piano

Phase Two: Single soloist (or family)

Phase Three: Trios/Quartets of unrelated folk who social distance up front

Whereas these questions to worship, there are similar questions that your leadership should be asking in terms of Education, Property, Fellowship, etc. You also need to discuss what happens when guidelines aren't followed (i.e., someone shows up to worship with a bad cough and/or refuses to wear a mask)

## Sample Strategic Charts

This first chart drives the actions on the second. Determine what are the appropriate sized groups and how vulnerable populations are to be guided. The second chart gives an overview with a need for additional phased breakdowns (such as the example above)

	<b>Phase One</b>	<b>Phase Two</b>	<b>Phase Three</b>	<b>Beyond</b>
Group Size*				
Vulnerable Populations*	Stay home	Stay home	Distancing	Individual choice
Overall Guidance	Strict distancing	Moderate Distancing	Limited distancing	"Normal"?

\*This may be determined by the State. Prior to New York Pause we were encouraged to base the group gathering size on density – making certain we were below 50% occupancy. If guidelines aren't provided, it would be helpful for the Session to determine appropriate maximum size (ex. Phase 1 = 10 or less, Phase 2 = 50 or less, etc.

\*\*There's important theological work that needs to be done here. Is it the whole church gathering if some cannot gather? How does this new reality impact conversations about accessibility in other forms?

	<b>Phase One</b>	<b>Phase Two</b>	<b>Phase Three</b>	<b>Beyond</b>
Church office (for example)	Church Admin in office only. No physical appointments	Church Admin and Pastor in office, no physical appointments	Church office and Pastor available by appointment	Standard operating procedures
Worship services				
Church meetings				
Sunday School (Children)				
Sunday School (Youth)				
Sunday School (Adults)				
Choir				
Fellowship after church				
Fellowship Programming				
Mission work				
Church use by other organizations				

There are a number of wonderful resources being developed. The above relied heavily on the wisdom of the following:

Returning to Church. Wisconsin Council of Churches.

<https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/>

Church Music in the Age of Covid-19. Wisconsin Council of Churches.

<https://www.wichurches.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Returning-to-Church-Church-Music-final.pdf>

24 Questions your Church Should Answer Before People Return. Ken Braddy

[https://kenbraddy.com/2020/04/18/20-questions-your-church-should-answer-before-people-return/?fbclid=IwAR0CK7qAs9twQiN6PCrAT3OvSdbNROR0e\\_VXLjyGqS4sX9pyETq6lc\\_gMfo](https://kenbraddy.com/2020/04/18/20-questions-your-church-should-answer-before-people-return/?fbclid=IwAR0CK7qAs9twQiN6PCrAT3OvSdbNROR0e_VXLjyGqS4sX9pyETq6lc_gMfo)

CDC's Interim Guidance for Faith-Based Organizations, etc.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/guidance-community-faith-organizations.html>

A larger collection of resources can be found on the presbytery website:

<https://www.presbyteryofnny.org/resources/Covid-19/>

## Other Critical Considerations – Moving Forward

The above focuses on primarily technical questions that church leadership needs to answer in order to do its fiduciary responsibility to keep our congregations and communities safe. This resource also begins to lead toward development of a strategic plan for congregations to open their doors again.

What this paper does not do is some of the critical work (and generative work!) that needs to happen in addition to all of the above. **The church will never be the same.** It cannot ever be the same. The difficult work that lies ahead is discerning what we've learned about God and the church in all of this.

Some of the questions that we might find ourselves asking include...

- 1) Does our church need a building in order to accomplish the ministry God desires of us?
- 2) What surprised us during this time in regards to our ability to adapt? What does that suggest for us to move forward?
- 3) Ultimately, what were the things that our community missed in being apart?
- 4) Were there things that we gained in our time apart? New learnings? New passions?
- 5) Where was our focus? Was it on God? Caring for our members? Concern for our neighbors?
- 6) How did we care for the community outside our walls? How might we do so now?
- 7) If our reach grew by offering online services, will we continue to offer those? How will we ask online friends to engage deeper in their own faith?

Other questions that need to be asked is whether the role of the church in society has changed during this period. Are there things unique to our work and calling the church to do in such a time as this? How will we minister to those impacted by significant economic upheaval? How will we minister to those deep in grief, or suffering from trauma? How will we help to shape the rebuilding of a world that is more just?