

Guidelines and practices to consider when reopening churches are now available.



*Credit:
C. Kutchukian/The United Church of Canada*

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As businesses are gradually being given the green light to open, church boards are also looking to throw open their doors. However, they will be opening to a new normal. The answer to whether or not to reopen: “It depends, and it will change.”

Reopening Churches during COVID-19, a new section on the COVID-19 page, is an initial list of things for church boards to consider in consultation with their regional councils on when and how to gradually to restart congregational activities and welcome back tenants.

The situation varies across the country. Church boards need to check public health directives and initially will need to change many of their in-person worship practices because social distancing will be with us for a while. Baptisms and communion will need to be individualized, coffee hour may be bring-your-own-beverage-and-mug, and even congregational singing may be curtailed.

Reopening once tenants can return will likely entail new cleaning protocols and the ways in which people use the building. Until a vaccine is available, COVID-19 may ebb and rise through communities in waves, throwing churches into an open-and-close pattern. Communities of faith will need to prepare and convene a committee or person to manage the unpredictable cycle.

Nevertheless, communities of faith can take heart. Who would have thought even a few months ago that so many would move to online worship and giving, many services attracting more people online than formerly in the pews? Communities are caring for one another, feeling vulnerable and strong at the same time.

Reopening Churches will be updated regularly, but church boards still need to check local regulations and direct any questions to their regional council. Moreover, let us not lose what has been gained by venturing into the online world. For many it will continue to be the way they connect with communities of faith. God's mission always finds a way to spring forth in a crisis.

- **Safety Considerations for Reopening during the Pandemic**

Guidance for those responsible for making decisions in all parts of the church, and things to consider before moving from one phase to another. **As of May 7, 2020.**

- **Phase 1: Reopening the Building during the Pandemic**

Small groups may meet in person in small numbers, with social distancing and masks. Worship will continue to be online only, with some exceptions for outdoor worship.

- **Phase 2: Reopening In-Person Worship during the Pandemic**

Worship and other activities resume in church buildings, with social distancing and other measures.

- **Phase 3: Full Return during the Pandemic**

For worship and other gatherings, you will still need to consider the health and safety regulations of your province.

Each council makes decisions on reopening for its areas of responsibility. The governing board of each community of faith should consult with its local public health unit, provincial health ministry, and regional council. The guiding principle is the safety of all who enter the building.

As of May 7, 2020

Over the past several weeks, we have learned so much about what it means to be church and how many ways there are to be church without gathering in person or making full use of our church buildings. Even as we do these things, we yearn for the time when we will be back together in community.

This page is intended to assist those responsible for making decisions in all parts of the church. **It is not a directive but is offered as guidance.** Updates will be offered as the situation develops, and your input is welcome.

The Big Picture

- The safety of staff, volunteers, church members, and all those we serve needs to guide our decisions about reopening any activities.
- It is likely that COVID-19 will continue to affect the ways we behave and the activities we take part in for at least the next year.
- Common guiding principles will be decided cooperatively by senior General Council and regional council staff. Regional councils and local communities of faith will implement these principles, bearing in mind regional and local variations in circumstances.
- Decisions about larger denomination-wide events will be made by the General Council Executive or senior leadership.

Public Health Directives and Gradual Reopening

- It is important to keep up to date on all government and public health directives and guidelines, and to adhere to them.
- Simply adhering to these directives and guidelines may not be enough. We need to keep in mind our context, including the types of activities we host, and the age and health demographics (health vulnerabilities) of participants.
- Do **not** look for ways to get around or bend the public health directives and guidelines. We need to work within both the rule and the spirit in which they are given.
- Although many things are not clear, one that is clear is that the return will not happen all at once. As with the general return in our communities, plan on a staged renewal of activities and with the adaptations necessary to protect safety. Consider “hybrid” plans: ones that allow for face-to-face gathering where it is necessary, but using distance gatherings (conference calling, online, etc.) where possible.
- In the various government plans being released across the country, moving to the next step depends on continued assessment of the progress of containing COVID-19. If a levelling off of new cases is followed by another wave, the movement toward reopening will be slowed down. The church needs to pay attention to these same considerations.
- Things may look different for a while or for a long while. Some things may even look different permanently, as there have been learnings from this pandemic time that we will want to remember later.
- Each community of faith should consider having a COVID-19 Reopening Committee that works with the governing body about actions specific to your pastoral charge and the regional council.

Moving through the Phases

Some considerations for your governing body and Reopening Committee to think about before moving from one phase to another. You may need to give specific instructions or do certain things to help people understand that they will need to do some things differently when they first return to worshipping or otherwise gathering in the church building.

- What extra cleaning practices need to be implemented?
- What changes will you make in worship practices?
- How will you discourage hand-shaking or other physical contact?
- Do you hold a “coffee hour,” and if so what does it look like, and then when to reopen gatherings with food?
- What protocols are needed for rental groups, and how will you work or communicate with them on these protocols?
- Will your practices on “return” be acceptable to your insurer?
- Having done things so differently during this time, what of the “differently” is there merit in continuing?
- If you moved study groups or daily devotionals online and liked it, is it sustainable in terms of ministry personnel time to continue to do it the new way and pick up how you had been doing it?

Phase 1: Reopening the Building during the Pandemic

Small groups may be in the building. Worship is still online only, with some exceptions for outdoor worship.

The Building

- Church boards, committees, or staff groups may meet in person in small numbers, respecting local restrictions, and with social distancing and masks.
- Churches need to have an opening plan that spells out the provisions for safe opening. They should require the same of their tenants before allowing them back.

Worship Guidelines

Generally, worship will continue to be held online only, although some exceptions may be made for outdoor worship with social distancing and masks.

Communion

If communion is offered, best practices suggest the following:

- The officiant and servers use hand sanitizer before offering communion.
- Individual pieces of bread and individual cups are offered.
- Servers offer the bread and cup to each person, rather than each person taking them from a communal plate or tray.
- Each communicant places their empty cup into a separate receptacle.

Passing the Peace and the Offering Plate

- Social distancing must be maintained. Offering a phrase or pressing hands together in a prayerful bow can convey the message of passing the peace.

- Passing the offering plate should be avoided. Place the plate in the church for people to drop their offering into, and have gloves available for staff handling cash or cheques. Now is the time to suggest that people give through PAR.

Singing

- There should be no congregational or choir singing.
- Soloists must be at safe distances from each other and from the congregation.

Source: [A Conversation: What Do Science and Data Say About the Near Term Future of Singing](#) webinar recording.

Cleaning

After each gathering, it is important to thoroughly clean bathrooms, door handles, hymnbooks, pew Bibles, backs of pews, microphones, musical instruments, and all other highly used areas.

Over 60 or Otherwise Vulnerable?

- People over 60, those with underlying medical conditions that have weakened immune systems, and those who have family members at home who are vulnerable are encouraged to participate only in online activities.
- Clergy who are in one of these categories should have a conversation with their Ministry and Personnel Committee to develop an alternate option where exposure to groups of people is limited and high-risk activities are avoided altogether.
- Ministry personnel who are at higher risk or who have family members at home who are at higher risk must exercise diligence in limiting their exposure to groups of people and higher-risk activities

Phase 2: Reopening In-Person Worship during the Pandemic

Worship and other activities resume in church buildings, with social distancing and other measures.

Masks, Social Distancing, and Limited Singing

- In-person worship could resume in church buildings where space allows social distancing, adhering to public health directives and allowable numbers. Masks may be worn.
- Only soloists can sing, appropriately distant from congregants, because singing by congregants can cause droplets to spread farther.
- Even after resuming in-person worship, online versions should continue to be available for those in high-risk categories who need to continue to avoid group activities.

Weddings, Baptisms, and Funerals

Small funerals, weddings, and baptisms may be held within local restrictions about numbers.

- Infant baptism: The parents/guardians of the child should be the only ones to hold them. The officiant will need to sanitize their hands before each baptism.
- Child and adult baptism: Water should come from individual cups or a bottle for each person, not the common font.

Administration and Maintenance

- Maintenance and administration functions resume more fully, but with provisions for social distancing. These might include such measures as alternating times for staff to be present in the office.
- Tenant use of church buildings may be staged back in, depending on the types of activities and the ability to implement appropriate safety protocols.
- Deep cleaning needs to be done after every gathering.

Phase 3: Full Return during the Pandemic

For worship and other gatherings, you will still need to consider the health and safety regulations of your province.

Worship and Gatherings

Worship services with people in attendance, in-person small groups, and in-person gatherings of all kinds may not be possible until a vaccine is developed and generally available. However, if public health directives say worship can resume fully, people may still want the option of distancing in the sanctuary and wearing masks.

For gatherings including coffee hour and congregational dinners as well as fundraisers with food preparation, you will need to consider all of the health and safety regulations for the province in this time of COVID-19 recovery.

Don't Forget Your Online Members

The ability to participate online may continue to be important for people in vulnerable categories. Many church members and regular participants may be from vulnerable categories.