



## Session Resource on Re-Opening Church Buildings

The second chapter of the Book of Acts, which describes the worship experience and practices of the early church, illustrates the fulfilment that comes from worshipping together, and the many ways the celebration of faith is physical, material and incarnational. The faithful members of the early church,

...devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people (Acts 2:42–47a).

When we gather in person in sacred spaces to worship, we eat, drink and sing together. We long to see and greet one another face to face, and to reach out for the bread, the wine, and for each other.

Physical distancing and other public health directives have interrupted or halted many of our regular worship practices and community activities. While we yearn to put this time of physical separation behind us and return to the familiar practice of gathering in person as a congregation, it is vital that Sessions carefully develop and implement re-opening plans that are appropriately tailored to the unique context and texture of each congregation and its ministries.

Acts 2 reminds us of the great care that members of the early church had for the physical needs of each other within the context of their worship and praise of God. The planning that Sessions do in preparation to return to physical assemblies is an important act of pastoral care. In addition to consulting and following all health and safety regulations, Sessions and ministers will want to engage in theological reflection and think through pastoral care concerns carefully in their re-opening planning. Taking time to consider the needs of the congregation is, in itself, a means of honouring God's creation and love of all people. We belong to God and are made in the divine image of God. It is not only right, but our duty to carefully discern what is best for the community before acting.

The advice of public health officials continues to change as more becomes known about COVID-19, so it is essential for Sessions and worship leaders to be proactive and always up to date on the latest directives and guidance from Federal, Provincial and Municipal Health authorities. It is important to consult with the appropriate government bodies when in doubt about any matter as directives vary regionally.

This resource seeks to provide support for Sessions and worship leaders as they reflect and act upon their pastoral duties to make responsible, faithful, thoughtful and lawful decisions about public worship and gatherings.

## Considerations as You Prepare to Meet with Leaders in the Congregation

- There are many suggestions, articles and opinion pieces circulating on the Internet or available in newspapers. As you consider the opinions you encounter, always remember your community's identity including its location, the nature of the congregation and its unique practices. Information from other provinces in Canada or other countries may not be as helpful or relevant to you. Be sure to compile and follow official information and resources relevant to your municipality, county and province.
- Recognize that people will come with their own needs, concerns, circumstances and viewpoints. Pastoral care issues that were not known previously may arise or take unexpected forms.
- Consult widely. Seek guidance from leaders who are representative of the entire church and its activities (worship, education, youth gatherings, summer programs, building support, etc.).
- Consider developing a phased approach to re-opening. There does not need to be a strict timeline that each phase has to adhere to. One phase could last weeks or months before the church is ready to proceed to the next phase, but make sure you have a process in place for determining when to move onto the next phase or prolong it. Communicate clearly that plans may need to change depending on the health of the community.

## Who is Responsible?

The Session of each congregation discerns matters together for the purpose of establishing good order and providing for the pastoral care of the congregation (Book of Forms, section 109). All who are members are subject to the authority and discipline of the Session.

The Session is responsible for all policy and procedures with respect to the use of the church buildings and property (subject to the provisions in the Book of Forms, sections 114.6 and 163).

The minister is responsible for the conduct and content of public worship. However, the Session is responsible for regulating the hours and forms of public worship and for arranging special services. The Session also determines the appointed times and provides for the administration of the sacraments.

Sessions and worship leaders take all appropriate steps to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 while attending to the spiritual and pastoral needs of the congregation. Decisions about when to allow worship and what form of worship will be appropriate are made only when allowed by local authorities and after careful consideration is made by the Session to ensure a climate of safety. Faithful witness to Christ entails protecting the vulnerable, and since all are vulnerable in varying degrees to this pandemic, part of the church's witness must be operating in ways that are caring and that do not put people at further risk.

The Session will always want to:

- Be transparent about how decisions are made.
- Regularly consult and clarify the directives of local health authorities.
- Be realistic about expectations for the gradual return to public worship and gatherings.
- Recognize and communicate to the community that practices may change as the virus circulates in different ways at different times.
- Continue to alter plans for worship, mission and ministry appropriately.
- Be encouraging and supportive of continued practices of worship and prayer at home, including online worship services.
- Evaluate risks of public worship and gatherings, and mitigate risks through implementing appropriate measures, such as limiting the size of gatherings.
- Attend to risk reduction measures in buildings, such as cleaning, sanitation and hygiene measures.
- Have and use personal protection equipment according to the directives of local health authorities.
- Document closing/reopening procedures, communication and decisions.
- Be alert to how improvements can be made.
- Maintain lists of people who were present for worship and other gatherings to enable the management of cases through contact tracing and follow-up.
- Provide regular communications to members, staff, renters or tenants, and other stakeholders by updating signs, website, etc., with accurate and easily accessible information.

## **STEP 1—Groundwork**

In considering the best procedure and time for re-opening church buildings, the Session and minister(s) should first attend to the following:

- Identify the ministries and missions of the congregation and uses of the building.
- Know the public health directives for the area.
- Determine whether public gatherings are permitted and under what directives. If so, the Session can then discern whether or not it is appropriate to hold gatherings at the church.
- Identify the risk factors associated with participation in the ministries and missions of the church.
- If a decision is made to hold a gathering, identify how public health directives will be adhered to, as well as other ways to reduce risks.
- Inform people about the risks and risk reduction measures for any particular in-person gathering or activity.
- If there is no way to safely hold a public gathering under the prevailing health directives, consider alternate means of conducting the activity (i.e., online meetings, using soloists in worship rather than congregational singing).

## **STEP 2 – Implementation**

### **Gathering the Community**

- Plan for best practices in all internal and external areas of the building, including high-traffic areas such as parking lots and hallways, when addressing safety issues.
- Consider additional days and times for worship and other events to facilitate smaller gatherings rather than holding one large gathering.
- Consider additional locations beyond the sanctuary to hold worship, namely spaces that allow for greater space between people. Outside space (i.e., lawns, gardens, or parking lots) may be preferable when gatherings are permitted.
- Be prepared to rearrange spaces so that they adhere to physical distancing directives.
- Provide hand sanitizer/hand washing stations in convenient, accessible places.
- Remove non-essential items from common spaces and eliminate as many surfaces of contact as possible.
- Use projection, if possible, to display worship aids and reduce contact through the sharing of books and other printed worship aids.
- Clean high-touch surfaces frequently.

### **Attendance at Public Worship**

- As public gatherings are allowed, communicate clearly that people should only attend worship services as they are comfortable. No pressure should be placed on anyone to participate in person.
- The Session will consider continuing online worship services and sending sermons and prayers to parishioners by email well after gatherings are permitted.
- Devote extra efforts to connect with those who cannot and should not come to public worship, such as those who live alone, have health concerns, or recently suffered loss and grief.

### **Physical Distancing**

Being able to maintain a safe distance from one another will be important in planning and holding public gatherings. The Session and minister(s) should attend to the following to ensure that people can move safely within a space:

- Rearrange seating, gathering spaces and passageways to accommodate physical distancing requirements and reduce crowding.
- Add floor markings and barriers to manage traffic flow and space between people.
- Allot additional time at gatherings to allow people to organize themselves in ways that minimize close contact and touching surfaces.
- Cancel and postpone gatherings that are not permitted.
- Members of a household do not need to be separated from one another, and may sit, worship and travel together

### **Personal Care**

- Ensure all sinks in the building are appropriately equipped for effective hand washing.
- Ensure hand sanitizer and facial tissues are readily available throughout the sanctuary and building to encourage better hygiene.

- Ensure garbage cans are accessible so that people can dispose of gloves, Kleenex and other garbage easily and safely.

### **Masks**

- Worship leaders will take care in selecting face masks, when necessary, that do not distract from the focus of worship.

### **Signs**

- Post signs to remind people of the importance of the appropriate health and safety precautions.

### **Buildings**

- Put in place additional cleaning routines to ensure that all frequently touched surfaces, such as countertops, doorknobs, light switches and faucets are consistently cleaned and disinfected.
- Clear away clutter and non-essential items to make surfaces easier to clean.
- Take special care to put protocols in place that address the handling and disposing of garbage and recycling.

### **Childcare and Church School**

- Childcare and church school can resume only after permission has been granted by health authorities and when congregations can meet or exceed the directives they must adhere to in order to reduce risks.

### **Bulletins and Worship Books**

- Refrain from distributing and using printed bulletins, books and other shared items until it has been permitted, and deemed appropriate by the Session.
- Some congregations may be equipped to project much of the order of service onto screens in the sanctuary and/or can send the worship documents by email beforehand so that people can view them on their smart phones and other electronic devices during the service.

### **Singing**

- Congregational singing is a high-risk activity.
- Soloists and instrumental music are alternatives to consider in lieu of congregational singing.
- If the risk of transmission while singing in a group has been reduced and local health authorities permit it, the Session could consider re-introducing choir singing into public worship by providing as much physical distance as possible in the sanctuary and choir lofts.

## Passing the Peace

- Passing the Peace never necessarily involves touching. Leaders can describe and model options for sharing the peace and communicate these practices clearly.
- People may opt to smile, wave, bow, bring their hands together in a praying posture, use sign language, etc.—whatever action feels comfortable as others acknowledge them in kind.
- Those worshipping at home can share Christ's peace across the distance through text messages, voice messages, social media posts, or postcards.

## Offering

- Develop and promote options for electronic giving: [presbyterian.ca/stewardship/digital-giving/](https://www.presbyterian.ca/stewardship/digital-giving/).
- A variety of effective options may be found to reduce close contact and passing offering plates between people. For example, offering plates could be placed around the sanctuary and people asked to place their offering upon entering or exiting.
- Ensure people maintain physical distancing while counting the offering and wash their hands afterwards.

## Baptisms

- As health authorities allow assemblies to increase beyond household gatherings, Sessions may elect to authorize baptisms at public worship, when it is appropriate.
- It may be advisable for the minister to lead the congregation in the prayers and liturgies, but not hold babies and/or ask parents or other family members to place the water on the person being baptized.
- Ministers should not use gimmicks that will distract worshippers.

## Weddings and Funerals

- Public celebrations take place in the context of the regulations established by health authorities. Ensure that appropriate physical distancing can be easily maintained at these functions.
- Consult with local funeral directors about best practices for your area.

## Holy Communion

- Holy Communion should be celebrated only after health authorities have allowed it, and the Session has deemed a celebration appropriate and mitigated risks associated with it.
- Congregations should adapt their practices of sharing the bread and wine in accordance with the advice of public health officials.
- As at all times, the communion elements should be prepared in a hygienic way and environment. This includes limiting the number of people who handle the elements.
- Celebrations of Holy Communion should be conducted in ways that allow for physical distancing and minimize close contact. Congregations can consult health authorities for best practices. Risk reduction measures may include:
  - Inviting worshippers to come forward individually rather than passing elements through the congregation.

- Serving across the communion table as a way to reinforce physical distancing.
- Having the server place the bread in worshippers' open, outstretched hands rather than having multiple hands come in contact with the plate or basket.
- Offering small individual cups of wine or juice, and spreading them out around the service tray so that worshippers may take one cup without touching another.
- Providing a basket or table at the side(s) of the sanctuary where worshippers may leave their cups after drinking.
- Placing small portions of bread and wine/juice on a large table that provides ample space between each portion, for worshippers to take.
- Worship leaders should encourage people to take their time and exercise patience throughout the service of communion. Reassure worshippers that they may also choose to refrain from receiving communion in good conscience and without judgment.

### **Departures**

- Have a plan for the orderly dismissal of the congregation to maintain physical distancing. For example, have the last rows leave first, then second to last rows, and so on; encourage ushers to direct the dismissal process.
- Open doors to reduce contact with door handles.
- Encourage people to leave the building rather than mingling.

### **Coffee Hour**

- Social activities are always governed by the directives of health authorities.
- When health authorities allow for social activities to take place again, and Sessions decide that it is appropriate to meet for fellowship, there are adjustments that congregations can make to minimize close contact, such as meeting outside or in large open rooms and encouraging members to bring their coffee with them.

### **Pastoral Visits**

- Visits with the sick and homebound can continue under the guidance of the advice of health authorities.
- Congregations should take care to contact those who are homebound and most vulnerable by phone, email, etc.

### **Rentals**

- As in all cases, congregations must consult and adhere to the standards set by the appropriate government and health authorities.