



# Plan to Reopen Churches

## SOUTH CENTRAL CONFERENCE OF SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS

*South Central Conference Emergency Response Team:*

John S. Nixon, Sr., Chair, Joe Grider, Kennedy Luckett, Dorian Melo, Stephanie Scott, Marc Ware,

### INTRODUCTION

As we plan the reopening of our churches for in-person worship, we have determined it is best to be guided by the counsel of the public health professionals: CDC, WHO, NIH, infectious disease organizations. Based on that advice, we have set guidelines for a gradual, phased approach to reopening. The specific dates for each phase will be determined by conference administration.

It is important to keep in mind that scientific knowledge on the pandemic is developing and changing on a daily basis. Because of this, plans to reopen cannot be set in stone. All plans should be considered tentative, contingent on what the virus does, such as, an uptick in cases, the discovery of new causes of infection, or a new treatment.<sup>1</sup>

While we know it is impossible to get to a place of zero risk, we are committed as a conference to see to it that no one will contract the virus because they attended one of our services. The safety of the worshipper is our number one priority

The situation in South Central is complicated by the fact that we have churches in five states, schools in four states, and five language groups. All five SCC states (Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, Mississippi, Tennessee) have eased coronavirus restrictions to varying degrees, though not in harmony with CDC recommendations<sup>2</sup>. Because of these facts, guidance from the administrative office is all the more important.

Some churches may find that even though they qualify to reopen based on conference guidelines, they are not ready to reopen. If for any reason a church prefers to remain a virtual church at this time, it has that option.

As we partner together in these dangerous times, please adhere to the following guidelines. Contact the conference office before reopening, using the reopening checklist provided. Specific due dates for applications to be submitted to the conference will be communicated at the appropriate time. Please email your completed checklist to secretariat at: [jnixon@scc-sda.org](mailto:jnixon@scc-sda.org) Let's pray together as we determine to make wise, Holy Spirit-led decisions.

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Easley Allen, Ph.D., R.N., Response to South Central Conference Plan to Reopen Churches, Schools, and the Administrative Office (draft), May 28, 2020

<sup>2</sup> Fourteen consecutive days of downward trend in new coronavirus cases, widely available testing and contact tracing

*The following guidelines and recommendations have been approved by the Conference Executive Committee.*

**PHASE 1: CHURCHES WITH AN ATTENDANCE OF 50 OR LESS MAY REOPEN UNDER THE GUIDELINES THAT FOLLOW.**

In addition to the number attending, the overall space in the sanctuary will be taken into account so that social distancing may be observed.

Drive-up worship will be permitted in phase 1, based on the directions outlined in the SCC Drive-up Worship Guidelines.

**Guidelines:** (THESE APPLY TO ALL CHURCH FACILITIES)

- **Strict social distancing**<sup>3</sup> (use floor stickers, mark pews, remove chairs, etc.)

**NOTE:** Social distancing is not required for families that live in the same household

- **Cloth face coverings** are an essential precaution for all.<sup>4</sup>
  - The risk of catching the coronavirus, simply put is, “breathing in everybody’s breath.”<sup>5</sup> CDC estimates that there is a 20-50 percent chance that people infected with coronavirus do not show symptoms (silent spreaders).
- **No potlucks**, family style or buffet meals, NOT including uncooked, prepackaged food distribution.
  - Involvement in community food distribution is a much needed ministry at this time but should be done safely.
- **No singing:** no choirs, praise teams, or congregational singing, plus, no responsive readings, or group recitations (such as reciting John 3:16).
  - Singing is a high risk activity under COVID-19 since respiratory droplets are spread even further than by coughing or sneezing. Respiratory droplets can be seen, but we also emit much tinier aerosols, invisible to the eye, whenever we breath, talk, or sing. These aerosols project further and remain suspended in the air longer than the larger droplets.
  - Donald Milton, a researcher in respiratory epidemiology at the University of Maryland, cites multiple studies that show the path of particles in exhaled air. The respiratory droplets travel the farthest by drifting on air currents. A 1-micron-sized particle is 100 times smaller than a strand of hair. It can carry 1,000 coronavirus particles.<sup>6</sup>
  - Singing is also considered high risk because it requires the opening of the diaphragm and deep inhalation.<sup>7</sup> “With singing, you’re breathing more deeply and you’re pushing air out to create sound. And it can go further.”<sup>8</sup>
  - Singers fall into a classification known as “super emitters” because they release more aerosols.<sup>9</sup> Church services and choir activities have been implicated in several super-spreading events.

<sup>3</sup> A minimum of 6-feet between persons whether in the sanctuary, in the church lobby, or in the parking lot

<sup>4</sup> Face masks should cover nose and mouth and fit snugly under the chin; each church should have a supply on hand

<sup>5</sup> Charles Haas, Environmental Engineer at Drexel University

<sup>6</sup> Bonnie Pritchett, “Coronavirus cancels singing in church”, *WORLD Radio*, May 21, 2020

<sup>7</sup> Particles up to 100 microns in size are considered inhalable [1 micron = 1 millionth of a meter]

<sup>8</sup> Kelley Hill, quoted in WSFA12 News website, Mark Bullock, May 21, 2020

<sup>9</sup> Editorial Board, “No singing in church: Restrictions needed to limit COVID-19 Spread”, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, May 24, 2020

### **EXAMPLES:**

Days after the Amsterdam Mixed Choir gave a performance on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 102 of the 130 singers fell ill to COVID-19. One choir member died, and three partners of choir members died.

A choir rehearsal of the Skagit Valley Chorale in Washington State resulted in 40 of 65 choir members contracting COVID-19. Three were hospitalized and two died, even though they used hand sanitizer and observed social distancing. The infections came from one member who showed mild symptoms.<sup>10</sup>

**NOTE:** churches may want to consider alternatives to singing, such as virtual praise teams or online songs that are available through YouTube and other venues.

- **No handshakes, hugs, “holy kisses”**, including at the door; no congregating in the church lobby or in the parking lot before or after worship
- **Temporarily disconnect** all water fountains.
- **Temporarily remove Bibles**, hymnals, pens, information cards, and all frequently touch objects from the backs of pews/chairs.
- **Clean and disinfect** frequently touched surfaces before each use of your space.
  - Consistently sanitize before worship and between worship services, if there is more than one service. Schedule multiple services far enough apart to allow for cleaning and disinfecting between services. Develop a schedule of increased routine cleaning and disinfection.
- **Provide hand sanitizer** in several locations.
- **Ensure that ventilation systems operate properly**, and increase circulation of outdoor air as much as possible by opening windows and doors, using fans, etc. **Note:** air conditioning is not a ventilation system as it does not bring in outside air.
- **Shorten worship service** to minimize the amount of time spent in a confined indoor space. (SUGGESTION: 30-45 MINUTES)
- **Dismiss one row** at a time to observe social distancing.
- **Take attendance** for possible contact tracing or other needed communication. (SEE CHECKLIST FOR MORE INFORMATION)
- **Post signs** that promote protective measures in highly visible places: washing hands frequently, wearing face coverings, and practicing social distancing. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/index.html>

### **Specific to Our Children** (AGES 12 AND UNDER):

- **Must remain with parents/guardians** at all times, including when going to the restroom
- **Group activities** should be suspended
- **Additional children’s programs** may be added to replace group activities

**NOTE:** Children and older adults, age 65 or more, should be kept apart. Children, as high asymptomatic spreaders, place older adults under greater risk.

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## **Recommendations:**

- **Temperature checks** at the door along with a brief screening questionnaire (see checklist for details)
- **Communicate changes** in advance (what and why) so members will understand
- **Poll congregation** as to their feelings of safety, expectations, etc.
- **Vulnerable persons** (seniors/underlying conditions) continue to shelter at home
- **Provide/continue to provide** an online streamed service for those at home

**NOTE:** These guidelines and recommendations apply to gatherings of all sizes in this phased reopening plan

### **PHASE 2: CHURCHES WITH AN ATTENDANCE OF 150 OR LESS MAY REOPEN**

### **PHASE 3: CHURCHES WITH AN ATTENDANCE OF 500 OR LESS MAY REOPEN**

### **PHASE 4: ALL REMAINING CHURCHES MAY REOPEN**

**NOTE:** Larger congregations of 1,000 or more will need to develop special guidelines in consultation with the conference, for example, consider closing off sections of the building, if practical, to minimize the possibility for exposure.

- **Communion Service**
  - Mask and gloves are a must
  - Avoid handling and sharing implements, perhaps by placing communion bread and juice on a table and having each person approach, keeping appropriate distance from each other. Cups may be dropped into a receptacle on the way out.
  - Foot washing should be observed only between those in the same household.
- **Baptism**

New members may be added by profession of faith only at this time, until it is safe to return to our usual practice. The close contact between the pastor and the baptismal candidate is a risk factor. Even without speech, breathing at such close proximity presents a risk.

## **ADDITIONAL NOTES:**

1. Pastors should be prepared to deal with anxieties and mental health issues, such as depression, due to prolonged lockdown. Some members may be dealing with bereavement at the loss of loved ones to COVID-19.
2. Square footage and the design of the meeting space must be taken into account when planning social distancing - also movements of worshippers in relationship to each other, entryways and points of exit, etc.

3. Based on a possible resurgence of coronavirus at any time, it may be necessary to return to a prior phase, or to reinstate conference-wide closed status. In addition, each church or district should have someone designated to watch for changes in their own county/community for possible needed adjustments.
4. The Precautionary Principle
5. We are guided by the precautionary principle of the public health profession, which is based on the first bioethical law, “first do no harm.” The principle suggests that in all planning we should err on the side of caution:
  - *“When an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken, even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically.”<sup>11</sup>*

### **IMPORTANT REMINDER**

Minority communities are especially vulnerable to COVID-19. People of color are at greater risk to contract the disease, to be denied testing, to experience greater severity of disease, to be less likely to have access to a ventilator if needed, to receive quality healthcare, and to die.

This heightens the need for us to be vigilant and to take precautions to protect our people. We are responsible under God to do all we can do to protect the health of the entire congregation and to prevent the spread of the virus to the community.<sup>12</sup>



**SOUTH CENTRAL CONFERENCE OF SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS**  
**715 YOUNGS LANE • NASHVILLE, TN 37207 • 615-226-6500 • 615-262-9141**  
**IAMSOUTHCENTRAL.ORG**

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<sup>11</sup> Jane McArthur, Guest column: Without all the evidence on COVID-19, use the precautionary principle. *Winsor Star*, April 14, 2020

<sup>12</sup> Carol Easley Allen, Ph.D., R.N., Response to South Central Conference Plan to Reopen Churches, Schools, and the Administrative Office (draft), May 28, 2020