

South Central Conference Emergency Response Team: John S. Nixon, Sr., chair, Joe Grider, Kennedy Lockett, Dorian Melo, Stephanie Scott, Marc Ware, Dr. Carol Allen, consultant

Recommendations for Reopening Churches 2021

At the time SCC closed its church doors in 2020, the CDC, WHO, and others were recommending that in order to reopen safely, at least two of the following three conditions should be exist:

- 14 consecutive days of decreasing numbers of new coronavirus cases
- Widespread availability of an effective vaccine
- Widespread contact tracing

Caveat:

The downward trend in new cases was steady through most of January and February. A jump in cases occurred from March 7 to 8, from 40,366 to 98,513. Since then, the number of new cases has been fluctuating. The new variants have created concerns. Spring break fears. Smaller group gatherings are safer and easier to monitor.

PHASE 1

(1) Churches with an attendance of **100 or less** may reopen on April 10 under the guidelines that follow. In addition to the number attending, the overall space in the sanctuary should be taken into account so that social distancing may be observed.

(2) Pastors who intend to reopen in Phase 1 will meet with Administration and the Emergency Response Team for clarification, discussion and to answer questions.

(3) Pastors who reopen in Phase 1 should poll their members in advance to determine the number who plan to attend. This will help them to prepare.

(4) Pastors who reopen in Phase 1 should report weekly sharing details of the prior week's worship service. (email reopen@scc-sda.org)

- Number in attendance
- Safety protocols followed (specify)
- Number of positive coronavirus tests (if any)
- If any positive tests, have all worshippers who were in attendance notified?
- Other relevant issues

Reopening Guidelines (these apply to all church facilities)

1 - *Strict social distancing* – a minimum of 6-feet between persons¹ (use floor stickers, mark pews, remove every other chair, etc.)

- Note: social distancing is not required for families that live in the same household

2 - *Face coverings* are essential for all worshippers at all times while on church property.

This is to include the parking lot.² Even after vaccination, the CDC recommends that we keep wearing masks in order to prevent virus spread.

3 - *No potlucks*, family style or buffet meals, NOT to include uncooked, prepackaged food for distribution.

- Involvement in community food distribution is a much-needed ministry at this time but should be done safely.

4 - *Limited singing*: no large choirs or congregational singing, plus, no responsive readings, or group recitations (such as reciting John 3:16)

¹ A minimum of 6-feet between persons whether in the sanctuary, in the church lobby, or in the parking lot

² Face masks should cover nose and mouth and fit snugly under the chin; each church should have a supply on hand

- Guidelines for praise teams/small singing groups/musicians:

Spread out from each other as far as possible to observe social distancing

Keep at least 10-feet from the nearest pew/seat

Each singer/musician should have their own microphone

Disinfect after each usage

5 - *No handshakes, hugs, or "holy kisses",* including at the door; no congregating in the church lobby or in the parking lot before or after worship

- When you kiss or hug another person you are putting them in jeopardy.
Remember, they may be more susceptible than you are

6 - *Temporarily disconnect* all water fountains

7 - *Temporarily remove Bibles, hymnals, pens, information cards, and all frequently touch* objects from the backs of pews/chairs

8 - *Clean and disinfect* frequently touched surfaces before each use of your space

9 - *Consistently sanitize* before worship and between worship services. Schedule multiple services far enough apart to allow for cleaning and disinfecting between services. Develop a schedule of routine cleaning and disinfecting.

10 - *Provide hand sanitizer* in several locations

11 - *Ensure that ventilation systems operate properly. 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.

12 - *Shorten worship service to minimize the amount of time spent in a confined indoor space. (recommend 45-60 minutes for total service)*

13 - *Dismiss one row at a time to maintain social distancing*

14 - *Take attendance for possible contact tracing or other needed communication (see checklist for more information)*

15 - *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>

16 – *Pastors, officers, worship leaders, should model safe behavior at all times*

Specific to our children (ages 12 and under):

17 - *Must remain with parents/guardians at all times, including when going to the restroom*

18 - *Group activities should be suspended*

19 - *Additional children's programs* may be added to replace group activities

- Note: children and older adults³ should be kept apart. Children, as high asymptomatic spreaders, place older adults under greater risk

Recommendations

1 - *Temperature checks* at the door along with a brief screening questionnaire (see checklist for sample questions)

2 – *Communicate any changes* in advance so members will understand

3 – *Poll congregation* as to their feelings of safety, expectations, etc.

4 - *Vulnerable persons* (seniors/underlying conditions) continue to shelter at home

5 - *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

³ Age 65 and older

- Note: larger congregations of 1000 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 spread

Holy Communion

- 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

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 or community for possible needed adjustments.

The Precautionary Principle

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."⁴

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.

⁴ Jane McArthur, Guest column: Without all the evidence on COVID-19, use the precautionary principle. *Winsor Star*, April 14, 2020

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.⁵

⁵ 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