

## Bishop Lowry's Guidelines for Re-opening

The Cabinet and I are aware that many are anxious to return to in-person worship following the recent [updated guidance to houses of worship](#) from Gov. Abbot and Attorney General Paxton. It is my hope that the churches of the Central Texas Conference "Breathe Deep" and stay the current course of worshipping online. As the economy slowly reopens, it is possible if not quite likely that there will be a rise in COVID-19 infections. Many of our congregations have several members and guests who are in the high-risk category (over 60 or with underlying health issues) The vulnerable are not disposable and we must not put them at risk. As I said in [my latest video update](#) to the conference, now is a time for us to be a Christian people who live not by demanding our rights, but by being in care and compassion for our neighbors.

While I believe that reopening at this time is very unwise, the decision to return to in-person worship ultimately lies with the pastor and lay leadership of the local church. However, I cannot stress strongly enough that any church that wishes/plans to reopen must follow all appropriate civil and medical orders and guidelines, including those from the Governor, their county judge and local city officials. In addition, before holding in-person worship, the pastor should

1. consult with their lay leadership prior to making such a decision (at a minimum their Lay Leader, preferably their Administrative Council/Board or PPR Committee or Trustees)
2. consult with their District Superintendent (it is unacceptable to notify your DS after the fact!).

Please note that the recent updated guidelines from the Attorney General are related to worship only. All church business and meetings not related to worship should continue to strictly follow civil social distancing orders. It is highly recommended that you continue to employ online resources for these events.

### Central Texas Conference Guidelines for Returning to In-Person Worship

Any church choosing to reopen must take careful steps to maintain social distancing per Federal, State, County and/or other appropriate civil medical authorities. According the latest Attorney General [Guidance for Houses of Worship During the COVID-19 Crisis](#), Houses of worship should conduct as many of their activities as possible remotely. Services that cannot be done remotely should be conducted in accordance with guidance from the White House and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ("CDC"). Houses of worship, like providers of other essential services, are to follow additional guidance from the White House and CDC whenever possible. A list of guidelines is below.

- Encourage all attendees who are 65 and above to stay home and watch the services online, or provide a "senior service" exclusively for attendees 65 and above to attend in person.
- Ask all attendees who have an underlying at-risk health condition to stay home and watch the services online.
- Equip ushers and greeters with gloves and masks and ensure they are used properly.
- Consider keeping childcare closed, unless the house of worship can comply with [CDC guidelines for childcare facilities](#).
- Ensure all attendees sanitize their hands and put on a mask before entering the building.
- Ensure attendees sit with their family unit, use social distancing between each unit. Consider blocking off every other pew row. If necessary, add more service times to facilitate distancing.
- Clergy should dismiss attendees by family unit, maintaining social distancing.
- Staff should sanitize seats, doorknobs and handles, bathrooms, water fountains and other frequently touched surfaces between services.

- Consider refraining from passing collection plates and instead provide a central collection box in the building or encourage online giving.
- Consider how the sacraments can be administered without attendees having to touch the same surfaces and objects.
- Instruct sick employees, volunteers, and guests to stay home;
- Practice social distancing by maintaining appropriate distance between people;
- Maintain good hygiene by washing your hands frequently, using hand sanitizer, using your elbow to cover coughs, and not touching your face;
- Implement environmental cleanliness and sanitization practices; and
- Clean and disinfect work areas frequently.

To help ensure you are adequately prepared to safely reopen for in-person worship, please answer the following and use your answers as a checklist for developing your written plan.

- What will social distancing look like in your worship space? How will you ensure people are six feet apart and that there is no congregating? (i.e. no coffee pot where people gather, no greeting time, no handshakes or hugs, new ways of doing sacraments, etc.)
- How will you ensure good hygiene of your congregation? Where will hand sanitizer stations be? How will you encourage people to use their elbow to cover coughs, and not touching their face? Who will tell folks they must sanitize their hands and wear a mask before entering the building?
- Who will be responsible for environmental cleanliness and sanitization between services? How will you clean and disinfect areas? What products will you use? What schedule will you follow?
- Will you have your restrooms open? The Governor is recommending that we not have public restrooms at this time.
- How will you encourage all attendees who are 65 and above to stay at home? Who will be responsible for explaining why they cannot attend a worship service when they show up? Will you provide a “senior service” exclusively for attendees 65 and above to attend in person?
- Who will be responsible for telling all attendees who have an underlying at-risk health condition to stay home and watch the services online?
- What accommodations will be made for ushers and greeters to use gloves and masks? Do not use printed bulletins which could/would be handled by multiple people.
- How will you make sure everyone who enters the building has a mask on? Will you provide masks? Is there someone in your church who can make those? How will they be cleaned after use?
- What are you going to do about those who show up with children in need of childcare? Childcare should not be available, unless the house of worship can comply with CDC guidelines for child care facilities.
- How will it be communicated that attendees sit with their family unit, use social distancing between each unit? Will you need to add more service times to facilitate distancing.
- What plan will be used by the pastor to dismiss attendees by family unit, maintaining social distancing?
- How will offerings be collected and counted to ensure the safety of your counters? Currency is a carrier of the virus, you will need to have a centralized collection box, no passing the plate.
- What will be the plan for the sacraments? How can you administer them without attendees having to touch the same surfaces and objects?