

**ReLaunching Your Congregation Insights**

George Bullard, Executive Director

Columbia Metro Baptist Association

***GeorgeBullard@ColumbiaMetro.org***

Voice: 803.622.0923

1. **Three Big Questions about ReLaunching/ReOpening for Churches to Consider:**
	1. **Criteria for Opening:** What are your criteria for relaunching/reopening your church? Not a date, but the criteria that must be met for you to decide to open.
	2. **Phases of Opening:** What are the phases for relaunching/reopening your church? You will not go from zero to 100 in one Sunday but will likely phase-in your opening.
	3. **Readiness for Opening:** What must you do to prepare your facilities, your staff, and your volunteers for opening? What is your marketing plan to your congregation and your community context?
2. It took three weeks for people to break the habit of going to live church on Sundays. That was April 5th. It only takes nine weeks for people to establish a new habit about church. That will be May 17th. What new habit will your congregation have established by May 17th? How are you helping them develop a new, positive, Christlike habit?
3. What would it be like to launch almost 100 new congregations in a 30 to 40 day period in the Midlands of South Carolina? That is exactly what will happen at some point in the next couple of months. When your CMBA congregation relaunches, you need to do so as a new congregation that has learned many new things and engaged in great innovation. You need to proactively minister with the new vision of ministry God has given you during this pandemic. It is not a return to church, but the launching of a new spiritual and strategic journey for your congregation. What will that look like for your congregation?
4. When planning to relaunch your congregation, keep in mind those persons who are considered vulnerable. The vulnerable include – but are not limited to – (1) Elderly persons. (2) Persons with serious underlying health conditions, including high blood pressure, chronic lung disease, diabetes, obesity, asthma, and those who immune system is compromised such as by chemotherapy for cancer and other conditions requiring such therapy. (3) Persons with anxiety disorders. This actually includes a higher percentage of participants in many congregations then may be at first thought. We must help people deal with spiritual, social, mental, and physical anxiety about returning to their congregation. How will you communicate evidence of preparation and a feeling of confidence that will encourage the vulnerable to return to their congregations?
5. Given the report from CDC that 90 percent of all COVID-19 deaths in the USA have been among people age 55 years old or more, that are the implications are how you will regather old adults into the life and ministry of your congregation? Particularly by the time older adults are 65 to 70 years old, they are considered vulnerable simply because of age. (1) Likely they will be slower to move from virtual video venues or teleconferences back to live presence in the church facilities. (2) Many will have become experienced at engaging in virtual video venues so their small groups should continue gathering in this manner for a while as their primary means of getting together. How about an early worship service – like grocery stores have early shopping fours for seniors? They would be the first in the worship area after a weekly comprehensive cleaning.
6. When planning to relaunch our congregation, keep in mind the parents of preschoolers, children, and students who may have concerns about how the non-adults in their household will always be in safe situations in and around the church facilities.

Will parents even want their children under 18 years of age to come with them at first? Will one parent stay home with the children? What will single parents do? Will parents want the children in worship with them rather than in a classroom? What safeguard guarantees will your church commit to before parents will allow them children out-of-their site?

Will children’s workers need to be tested? What is the cleanliness standard for children’s classrooms? How will the physical distance be guaranteed? Since children have been around their parents constantly, what will be the extent of the separation anxiety of younger children? How will you address this? What are other questions or issues parents might have?

1. Consider the great outdoors. It is Spring and Summer will soon follow. How are ways you can use outdoor events and still practice physical/social distance? Numerous congregations have been successful with drive-in worship services on a periodic and even a weekly basis. These have been an alternative worship gathering.

 Also, consider this for small group gatherings. Again, some people have already been doing this in their neighborhoods to gather people in responsible ways. One or more congregations are talking about tailgating gatherings in the church parking lot, or other places. People come with their own food and drink, bring chairs and “circle the wagons” with appropriate physical/social distancing. Music is played. Fellowship happens. Worship happens. Community happens.

 How can you and your congregations appropriately gather, see one another, and draw closer to one another as a community, and closer to our Triune God?

8. Is online worship here to stay? Yes. Many congregations, once they go back to live worship in their church facilities, will continue to offer online worship.

 Why? First, as part of the various phases of getting fully back into live church, some demographics of participants will not come back for a while and will want to continue participating online so they can remain part of their active congregational family. This is particularly people considered vulnerable, and parents with preschoolers and children where they are not ready to bring them back to live church yet. Also, people unable to be present on any given Sunday due to illness or some other reason may still connect with your congregational worship.

 Second, some people have connected with the congregation during their online season who will want to continue connecting but cannot come to the church facilities due to work, health, or they do not live in the area. One example of people who do not live in the area are people who once did, but now live somewhere else and they desire to maintain contact with your congregation. This can also include military, students, family and relatives of current congregational participants, and other special groups of people.

 Long-term two extremes may happen. One is that this will play out after a while and you can stop providing a live-streaming of your worship. The opposite is that it will do so well that the need will arise to have an online campus of your congregation as a permanent worship ministry.

9. What should be done to prepare your congregational participants emotionally and spiritually for returning to your church facilities? First, develop a plan for continuous cleanliness and distancing of people as they return. Second, implement that plan. Third, communicate that plan to your congregational participants. Fourth, market your plan to your community context so they know your church facilities will appropriately serve as an emotional and spiritual sanctuary. Fifth, beyond the words of your church staff, invite a group of key lay influencers in your congregation to come to the church facilities for a distancing gathering to explain and show them all the details of the plan. Sixth, have these key influencers communicate through social media, e-mail, virtual conferences, video interviews, and written letters – among other ways – their confidence in the plan for returning to church facilities.

 Seventh, train your volunteers who will be in crucial places of service in the facilities about their role in cleanliness and distancing. Eighth, engage in a ten-day prayer countdown to the first Sunday where a portion of your congregational participations will return to the facilities for worship. (A portion because people will likely return in phases.) Nineth, the Sunday before you open back up to a “dry run” of all the procedures to ensure they will work right on the first Sunday back in the church facilities. Tenth, have people who return to the church facilities for worship share through the communication avenues listed above their joy in being back in the facilities, and that what was promised did happen.

10. ReLaunching your congregation is one of the very best opportunities your congregation will have – perhaps for many years – to express what it means to be a family of congregations – a Baptist association. Some smaller membership churches may really be struggling by the time congregations can go live. Medium membership and larger membership churches need to be ready to partner with them as a Kingdom approach to ministry. There could be a season of congregations fostering or adopting other congregations like big sister or brother fostering or adopting a sibling.

 Some of the needs will be financial, some leadership, some benevolence, some building repairs, some mutual prayer support, some strategic advice, somehow to continue online services, and other opportunities that can only be discovered by dialogue and the creation of mutual trust.

 What would your congregation be willing to do? Is your congregation one that would like to have a partner? If either of these situations is you, contact George Bullard at GeorgeBullard@ColumbiaMetro.org or 803.619.7110.

11. In this era of exploding high tech in how congregations are engaging in worship, small groups, and essential meetings, perhaps one of the very best things congregations could do is to go high touch. Reports are emerging of great high quality connections congregational leaders (staff and lay leaders) are making as they call every member household in their congregation. People appreciate the contact, are uplifted by the care and concern of their congregation, and are otherwise greatly impacted by this pastoral care initiative.

 In some congregations it is being so successful that an informal plan is developing to do this several times each year. If a congregation is nothing else, it is about relationships with God and one another. Certainly, it is also about relationships with a community context and people who need the unconditional love of God through Jesus Christ.

 We would do well to be informed by the concept that the reason people leave church is that they do not experience the sense of community, care, and closeness for which they have a longing. Perhaps this is an opportunity to demonstrate that a congregation is about people and their connection with God and one another rather than facilities, programs, and budgets.

12. During this pandemic have you given any thought to the size of your church facilities? Is there any possibility that you have concluded you do not actually need all that footprint and square footage? Have you given any thought to the stewardship of Kingdom resources represented by your church facilities? Is there any possibility that you have concluded you are not being good stewards of the use of your church facilities – particularly the larger areas?

 Have you given any thought to the percentage of the tithes and offerings from your congregation, and the special financial campaigns used to raise above and beyond funds to construct your church facilities? Is there any possibility this is too high of a percentage of your overall tithes, offerings, and special gifts compared to that which you have directly invested in fulfilling the Great Commission in the spirit of the Great Commandment?

 Have you given any thought to the fact that you are stretched or even having significant challenges in keeping up with the scheduled and needed maintenance of facilities built 10, 25, or even 50 years ago? Is there any possibility that you wish someone had considered and developed a clear plan for the long-term costs of maintaining you facilities before they were constructed?

 Have you given any thought to the fact that the architectural design of your church facilities 10, 25, or even 50 or more years ago assumed that the way you use space would be the same for your entire history? Thus, do you have large and small spaces in the wrong places for today, load-bearing walls that do not offer the flexibility you need for today’s ministry, and confusing buildings that call for guided tours and practice sessions just to show people how to get from one place to another?

 Hear these questions carefully. They are not saying someone sinned in the past as to how church facilities have been provided for your congregation. They are primarily to help this be a learning experience for your congregation that you will not quickly forget. Blessings to your congregation as you learn during this time of pandemic.

***(Keep checking as this document will be updated periodically.)***