

**Thoughts on ReLaunching Congregations During COVID-19**

It is a burning question so many church members are asking these days – when can we all worship together in person again? The decision to stop meeting for live worship services was made for churches in mid-March when South Carolina Governor Henry McMaster mandated that large gatherings cease in order to help stem the spread of COVID-19. While many CMBA churches are hitting their stride in livestreaming worship services and conducting video conference meetings, they are actively gathering information about how and when it will be safe to reconvene.

“CMBA takes very seriously our responsibility to serve our congregations during this COVID-19 Pandemic, and to provide them with the [information](https://www.columbiametro.org/relaunching-your-congregation/), knowledge and wisdom they need to make the best possible decisions as to how to ReLaunch their congregations as live, on-site congregations. To do so every week, we are researching the latest ideas and sharing them with our congregations through video conferences, social media, e-mails, and in-personal conversations,” says CMBA Executive Director George Bullard.

In recent weeks, a group of CMBA churches joined discussions with others across the Midlands about what leaders are considering as they make plans to reopen in various capacities. Current data and recommended practices from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are being weighed against worship seating capacity and installing new safety measures. The following are concepts and ideas shared by some of these churches as they consider ReLaunch phasing:

* **Contact all members.** Churches that have checked in with every member household during this time are seeing great benefits and positive feedback. The membership list is divided among church staff and sometimes key lay leaders, who make a contact and take prayer requests. Some of these churches are considering doing this several times a year moving forward.
* **The outdoors is your friend.** As churches look toward plans for late spring and summer, think about how to incorporate being together outside.
* **Small group potential.** Small groups can naturally lend themselves to socially distanced neighborhood or backyard gatherings within communities. There is anticipation that some of these small groups may turn into house churches or an expansion of new ministry after church site activities resume.
* **The needs of the vulnerable.** Consider a separate service just for seniors and other vulnerable members of the community. Some churches are labeling their early morning service for this population as it puts them first in the sanctuary after a cleaning and could facilitate them being spread out more easily.
* **Tailgate!** Gathering under this concept, the church would handle logistics of calendaring group access to parking areas on campus. The outside gatherings could be for small groups, Sunday School classes and life groups who provide their own “tailgating” supplies while they remain socially distanced for Bible study, prayer or singing.
* **Reach families through a shorter kid-friendly service.** It is anticipated that families with preschoolers and young children will not return to worship initially, so the idea is to provide something like a Christmas Eve style service just for them. Each family group would be distanced within the worship area and no nursery would be provided. Speaking of nurseries, some churches are discussing offering nursery care to volunteers’ children only in the early weeks of resuming live worship.
* **Keep streaming live worship.** Across the board churches are reporting high numbers of live stream viewers, including visitors who have never attended the church’s live worship services. Churches should continue to stream live worship services or upload recordings to social media platforms moving forward.
* **Online-only small groups are a new option for churches.** Groups of 10-12 people who commit to a short-term study are expected to develop and grow as a result of this period of virtual worship. This could be a good fit for churches located in a community with high turnover, such as near a military base.
* **Partner with other churches.** As they look to relaunch, smaller membership churches likely will have struggled and will need medium or larger sized churches to partner for a season or for an ongoing basis.

As CMBA churches process how to reopen the doors of the church it is becoming evident that there is no one right way to do it. One church polled its members through an online questionnaire to gauge their comfort levels for attending worship or small groups again. Others have worked closely with key lay leaders and deacons to map out a phased plan to slowly restart. What is not clear is who might actually show up when a church opens its doors on that first Sunday back.

Killian Baptist announced its plans to begin meeting again for Mother’s Day on May 10 with a shortened service. Pastor Chris Reinolds says the 70-80 regular attenders can be safely spaced within the sanctuary that seats 400, and they have plans in place to limit contact points, provide hand sanitizer and offer a way to download an order of worship instead of handing out printed copies. This first phase will be in place for several weeks before adding any other activities.

“The church leadership team considered local and state guidelines in comparison to our congregational size and the space in our facility,” Reinolds explains of the decision, adding his congregation has been updated on the process and timing through email and social media announcements.

Killian Baptist is in a unique position of having ample worship space for its congregation’s size. Churches with large sanctuaries are reporting working to estimate how many people can actually be seated if safely distanced, then how barriers could be replaced to seat worshippers arriving at a second service in clean seats not used during the first service. Another CMBA church is taking advantage of spring temperatures to hold a drive-in worship then several weeks of outdoor worship experiences before resuming an indoor service.

A few CMBA churches are getting closer to a comfortable ReLaunch plan but are not ready to identify a date. Those churches have a tentative phased plan and are using this time to work on physical adjustments to their facilities. One church estimates it has spent $4,000 on touchless faucets, bathroom fixtures and sanitizing stations and says some items, like the sanitizing stations and solutions, are on backorder. Others are investigating best practices to sanitize surfaces and cloth-covered pews. An Irmo pastor described the process as “before we can get to the ‘when,’ we are working on the ‘how.’”

Other CMBA churches are still in the information-gathering stages. Many are waiting for the anticipated 14-day downward trend in new viral cases before making a firm decision on reopening, with one adding they are considering pushing any identified date back two additional weeks out of an abundance of caution. In the meantime, it is advised that those churches that do reopen have clear communication about expectations regarding masks, temperature checks and how sick individuals will be treated.

The virus has dictated much of the safety measures going into planning for a ReLaunch and it is pushing church staff to get creative with future services in other ways. Many scheduled baptisms, for example, have been moved to later in the summer and may be held outside. Some are incorporating technology in new “touchless” ways, like offering a texting option in conjunction with the invitation time of a service.

Bullard encourages CMBA churches to embrace innovation right now, whether that falls under aspects of its style of ministry, strategy and structure or its fundamental substance – who a church is at its core.

“The COVID-19 Pandemic is so sad. One life lost is too many. In the midst of this crisis God is shining light on some doors of opportunity for congregations to leap frog forward in how they serve people with both a high-tech and a high-touch approach, as popularized by John Naisbitt in his book on emerging megatrends in our world culture. I am excited about how our congregations will be more effectively serving people a year from now. In the current darkness there is a great Light,” Bullard says.

Access up-to-date ReLaunch resources and information online at [www.columbiametro.org/relaunching-your-congregation](http://www.columbiametro.org/relaunching-your-congregation).