

SNE CHURCH REOPENING

WHAT WE ARE LEARNING

PREPARING TO REOPEN

As our Southern New England states phase into reopening in-person gatherings, we know you are hard at work establishing your churches reopening plans. We recently sent a survey to our Network pastors to capture some of their insight on what they have learned. Below is the summary of their challenges, guidance and recommendations. We hope this will be of help to you in the days ahead.

Q. WHAT OBSTACLES DID YOU FACE WHEN YOU REOPENED?

1. Navigating new service format
2. Adhering to cleaning/social distancing guidelines
3. Caring for community needs

NAVIGATING NEW SERVICE FORMAT

- The newness of a Saturday/Sunday format, getting enough people to staff different areas, setting up new streaming equipment to continue offering online services.
- Our first gathering went better than I expected and can't say we faced any real obstacles. I have to remind myself that I am also preaching to an online audience. That is something new to me and want to be mindful of that in my communication.
- Figuring out who came to what service! Online registration would not work for our context.
- We are doing drive-services at this time and the heat has been our only concern at this point.
- Implement shorter services.
- Allowing for social distancing when seated.
- Keeping people from gathering together after church.
- We did not have enough room inside for social distancing without double services, and we don't have enough staff for that, so we have been immensely enjoying outdoor services for the last five Sundays.
- People are hesitant to come due to COVID-19. We had about 20% of our normal attendance.
- The technology challenge of providing a live stream of the service to folks not able to be there in person was the biggest challenge.
- Increased need for volunteers when adding additional services.
- Not providing kids ministry in order to keep young people safe.

CLEANING/SOCIAL DISTANCING GUIDELINES

- Cleaning/Disinfecting the building supplies were hard to get.
- Wide difference in stance on whether masks should be mandatory or not. Bathrooms and what made sense from cleanliness. How to have children in service when they are used to age specific classes. The pre-service mingle and post-service lingering, how do you manage it or should you even try. Communion with a mask is difficult even with the individually wrapped ones.
- Discerning how to make sure all state guidelines were maintained and giving sufficient communication to the congregation regarding what to expect.
- People remembering to keep the mask on, and to do the 6 feet social distancing. They were so happy to see each other they wanted to hug you and lay hands and pray for one another.

CARING FOR COMMUNITY NEEDS

- Caring for the mental health of our members as a result of COVID.
- Fear of the virus.
- Not enough volunteers.

Q. WHAT DID YOU LEARN WHILE REOPENING?

1. Communication
2. Flexibility
3. Planning

COMMUNICATION

- The deepest trust in Jesus and the members of our congregation
- Keep repeating the directives on a weekly basis. Consider filming a video of your churches safety protocols so you can play it each week during service and post on your website/social media.
- People want to feel safe and be safe.
- You must over communicate and be an example. You must watch out for those who do not take socially distancing seriously.
- The church is essential to our communities.
- Communicate through e/mail, texting, Zooming, phone calling with church members. Keep small prayer Meetings going and one on one.
- Have a designated team to keep church people informed and to pray with them if they are going through difficulties
- Be clear about the expectations for people gathering, how you'll handle traffic flow, what you need from them when they arrive and what they can expect from you.
- Communicate confidence and let your folks know what to expect. You don't have to go into all the details, but you must communicate what to expect. This is critical.

FLEXIBILITY

- Don't over plan as your plans will change day of. Be reasonable and flexible. God is still on the throne and will work out the minor details. Don't try and recreate what you used to do, but instead get back to the basics of worship, the word and prayer. Then people will receive from the Holy Spirit what they needed.
- People are patient and happy to be together. Those who aren't ready to come back won't come back yet. And some of the people who found us online during quarantine have come to the church and we've had a few salvations.
- A good number of people still aren't ready to return!
- To be patient with the process. Preach to who comes and don't worry about the numbers. Be willing to set up an online campus and make the technological shift.
- The Holy Spirit knows and orchestrates things to reach people when you step out of the way. You can't please everyone with masks. Pick a way that your conscience allows and be firm. Kids are more resilient than we give them credit for. It's the parents that need more training. Outdoor is better with the current 25% capacity in CT. No fear of not having enough room and still maintaining your integrity to follow the law. Bathrooms are just bathrooms and people can make their own decisions. God still wants to reach individuals so don't let these things distract you from your mission.
- People are happy to be together. They are ok with services looking different. Most people have their own masks and hand sanitizer now. We have both available, but no one has needed them. People overall aren't following 6ft apart, so we needed to really guide where to put chairs. Families with children just aren't coming back. They want kids church and aren't willing to have kids in service with them. Overall people are happy to be back.
- Some older people will not be comfortable with this. Also, people with children are staying home.
- You can't please everyone.

PLANNING

- Indoor social distancing measures take more floor space than we initially thought.
- Be faithful and consistent.
- People are generally conditioned to cooperate with protocols, and they are eager to attend. Outdoor gatherings are best for our church at this time.
- Children and youth ministries are vital to our church.
- It is critical to have proper protocol and procedures in place before open.
- Let people return at their own speed. Handle the media carefully.
- Most all concerns resolved quickly. Patrons felt comfortable once back in their Church environment.
- It is simpler than it was made out to be. Simple church. Worship, word and prayer.
- Continue to offer service online for those who can't come or aren't ready yet.
- The mental/emotional exhaustion is more than the physical.

- Livestream, Zoom, Social media are effective and necessary to fulfill Great Commission in today's world.
- Outdoors for a while will work for us- preregistration was helpful in planning and in sending follow-up communication.
- Give people time to fellowship. If you have a lawn or space where people can spread out, encourage them to hangout for a few minutes after church while encouraging social distancing. Also, prepare activity packs to give to the kids. We included crayons coloring books, crossword/mazes, and other quiet activities for them to do during service. We did this and it was a hit
- If you're holding more than one service because of space, think through the registration process and the in between cleaning!
- Do what is right for your congregation. Every demographic is different. This will not last forever. The key is to remain strong and to thrive to the other side.
- Set up policies and procedures ahead of time and clearly explain them so people know what is expected. Keep the atmosphere positive to help people with nerves. We are having outdoor services and our people are loving it.
- Very important to stay connected with congregation. Sign up for online giving. Encourage your people. Be consistent in following the standards you set for attendees.
- To consider doing a "family" service, aimed at children, so families will be comfortable coming back together.
- Don't push the people. Start with limited services.
- Make the regulations very clear and ensure that it will be safe.
- Unless you are a mega church, find a nice place outside to have church. It's easier to spread out and nobody has to wear a mask. We use a park, but a football field with bleachers is also a great location.
- Realize you may not get the numbers you hope will come back.
- No children's or nursery programs at first.
- Remind staff and volunteers that a smaller crowd still deserves the same level of effort and excellence.
- Appoint a reopening task force. Filter decisions through staff, task force, and board. Resist shaming those who do not participate at first. Model the directives you expect others to obey. Remain positive and upbeat. Keep services to 50 minutes or less. Go out of your way to ensure that people are both safe and saved!
- Keep it simple. You won't please everyone. Be kind to those who aren't ready to come get but feel guilty because you are having church. Start something and go from there.
- Maintain your online excellence even as the numbers shift back toward on-site services.
- Train your volunteers well.
- Be creative, activate your team to use the resources available to them.