

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REOPENING PLACES OF WORSHIP

First Liberty Institute is committed to ensuring that places of worship can safely balance efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19 with the freedom to hold religious services consistent with their faith traditions. As America begins the reopening process, this resource can assist religious, civic, and community leaders, and places of worship, as they gradually reopen their doors.

On April 16, 2020, the federal government released guidelines for reopening America's states, cities, and businesses.¹ These guidelines call for a staggered reopening consisting of three (3) phases. This resource applies these federal guidelines to places of worship and recommends best practices for reopening. Please note that due to the differences in rates of testing, spread, and recovery, state and local requirements may vary. Places of worship must continue to monitor state and local requirements; these recommendations do not replace state and local requirements.

PHASE ONE

When states and localities announce phase one of reopening, places of worship can relax some, but not all, of their shelter-in-place restrictions. Generally, individuals are still encouraged to meet in groups of 10 or fewer, and places of worship should conduct religious services remotely when possible. However, if remote religious services are not possible due to logistical, technological, or financial constraints, places of worship may conduct in-person services so long as they observe the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines for social distancing.² Employees and volunteers of places of worship may return to work in phases, but should likewise observe the CDC guidelines. Common areas, such as kitchens, should remain closed, as well as schools, camps, and other organized youth activities. Vulnerable individuals, such as the elderly and those with underlying health conditions, should continue sheltering in place.³

¹ See The White House, *Opening Up America Again*, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/> (hereinafter "White House Guidelines").

² See Centers for Disease Control, *Interim Guidance for Administrators and Leaders of Community- and Faith-Based Organizations to Plan, Prepare, and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)*, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html>.

³ The White House guidelines define 'vulnerable' to include the elderly and those with serious underlying health conditions, including high blood pressure, chronic lung disease, diabetes, obesity, asthma, and those whose immune system is compromised. See White House Guidelines, 18.

PHASE TWO

During phase two, although social distancing is still encouraged, it can be relaxed to a greater degree. Individuals are encouraged to meet in groups of 50 or fewer. Such larger gatherings may observe moderate, as opposed to strict, social distancing protocols. Places of worship should continue encouraging employees and volunteers to work remotely if possible, and common areas should remain closed. Schooling and organized youth activities such as daycare and summer camps may reopen, and employees can resume nonessential travel. The federal government recommends that vulnerable individuals continue to shelter in place.

PHASE THREE

In phase three, individuals who are identified by medical professionals as not vulnerable do not need to practice social distancing protocols. Places of worship may resume unrestricted staffing of their workplaces. Gatherings and events of greater than 50 people, which may include religious services, should observe mild social distancing protocols. Although vulnerable individuals remain encouraged to shelter in place, if they choose not to do so, they should practice social distancing.

CONTINUOUS BEST PRACTICES FOR PLACES OF WORSHIP

During each reopening phase, the federal government recommends that individuals and employers maintain certain safety practices. For individuals, this generally means practicing good hygiene and staying home when sick. Below are some general recommendations for places of worship to follow throughout each phase.⁴

1. Everyone should perform regular temperature checks and stay home when they have a fever or feel sick.
2. Continuously monitor all persons for COVID-19 symptoms. If a person becomes symptomatic, the leadership should require the individual to stay home until he or she is cleared by a medical professional.
3. Equip all employees and volunteers with gloves and masks, especially those whose duties require frequent person-to-person contact or interaction.
4. All attendees—employees, volunteers, and visitors—should sanitize their hands and wear a mask while inside the building.

⁴ This list includes suggestions from the White House Guidelines and the Texas Attorney General & Office of the Governor, *Guidance for Houses of Worship During the COVID-19 Crisis*, at https://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/sites/default/files/images/admin/2020/Press/Revised%20Guidance%20for%20Houses%20of%20Worship%20During%20the%20COVID-19%20Crisis%20-%20Final.pdf?utm_content=&utm_medium=email&utm_name=&utm_source=govdelivery&utm_term=.

5. When possible, visitors should sit with their families. If possible, places of worship should consider adding more service times to facilitate distancing.
6. Sanitize seats and frequently-touched surfaces between services.
7. Places of worship should consider alternative means for certain traditional practices. For example, many places of worship utilize employees or volunteers to distribute items such as informational pamphlets, offering plates, or religious elements. If possible, public distribution of items should be avoided, and conveniently-located receptacles should be considered.
8. We recognize that faith communities engage in many different traditional and sacred practices. While it is impossible to devise a one-size-fits-all approach, places of worship are encouraged to consider means of conducting such practices that avoid attendees having to touch common surfaces and objects.
9. Implement procedures for contact tracing in case staff or an attendee tests positive for COVID-19. For example, attendees should track where they sat in each service.

CONCLUSION

First Liberty Institute continues to defend religious liberty for all Americans. During these perilous times, it is crucial that church and state work with, not against, each other. If you have questions or concerns about how your religious liberty has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, please visit www.firstliberty.org to learn more.