

CURRENT EVENTS

CDC Document Outlines Guidance for Reopening of Churches

APRIL 29, 2020

| JOE CARTER

The Story: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has compiled new “Interim Guidance for Communities of Faith” that outlines precautions churches may need to take when states lift their coronavirus restrictions.

The Background: The CDC’s document—which is not legally binding and has not been officially released yet—notes that the “guidance is not intended to infringe on First Amendment rights as provided in the US Constitution.” Neither the CDC nor any other federal government agency can prescribe standards for interactions of faith communities that are “more stringent than the mitigation strategies asked of similarly situated entities or activities in accordance with the Religious Freedom and Restoration Act (RFRA).”

The CDC offers the following suggestions for consideration “to the extent consistent with each community’s faith tradition”:

Hygienic and cleaning practices

- Encourage use of flexible or virtual options whenever possible for all non-worship activities (e.g., counseling, volunteer meetings).
- Follow specific CDC guidance for childcare or educational programming for children and youth.
- Encourage use of a cloth face covering at all gatherings and when in the building by everyone except children aged less than 2 years old. (Not using a cloth face covering may also be appropriate at times for some individuals who have trouble breathing or need assistance to remove their mask.)
- Have adequate hygiene supplies, such as soap, tissues, no-touch trash cans, hand sanitizer (with at least 60 percent alcohol).
- Consider posting signs on how to stop the spread of COVID-19 and promote everyday protective measures.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces at least daily and shared objects between use. Avoid use of items that are not easily cleaned, sanitized, or disinfected. Ensure safe and correct application of disinfectants and keep them away from children.

- Ensure that ventilation systems operate properly and increase circulation of outdoor air as much as possible by opening windows and doors, using fans, and so on. Do not open windows and doors if they pose a safety risk to children using the facility.
- Take steps to ensure that all water systems and features (for example, drinking fountains, decorative fountains) are safe to use after a prolonged facility shutdown to minimize the risk of Legionnaires' disease and other diseases associated with water.

Promoting social distancing

- Limit the size of gatherings in accordance with the guidance and directives of state and local authorities and in accordance with RFRA.
- Consider video streaming or drive-in options for services.
- If appropriate and possible, add additional services to weekly schedules to maintain social distancing at each service, ensuring that clergy, staff, and volunteers at the services ensure social distancing to lessen their risk.
- Consider holding services and gatherings in a large, well-ventilated area or outdoors, as circumstances and faith traditions allow.
- Space out seating for attendees who do not live in the same household to at least six feet apart when possible; consider limiting seating to alternate rows.
- Consider whether other gatherings may need to have attendance limited or be held virtually if social distancing is difficult, such as funerals, weddings, religious education classes, youth events, support groups, and any other programming.
- Avoid or consider suspending use of a choir or musical ensemble during religious services or other programming, if appropriate within the faith tradition. Consider having a soloist or strictly limiting the number of choir members and keep at least six feet between individuals.
- Consider having clergy hold virtual visits (by phone or online) instead of in homes or at the hospital except for certain compassionate care situations, such as end of life.
- Consider temporarily limiting the sharing of frequently touched objects, such as worship aids, prayer books, hymnals, religious texts and other bulletins, books or other items passed or shared among congregants, and encourage congregants to bring their own, if possible, photocopying, or projecting prayers, songs, and texts using electronic means.
- Modify the methods used to receive financial contributions. Consider a stationary collection box, the mail, or electronic methods of collecting regular financial contributions instead of shared collection trays or baskets.
- Consider mitigating the risk of transmitting COVID-19 posed by close physical contact among members of the faith community during religious rituals as well as mediated contact through frequently

touched objects, consistent with the community's faith traditions and in consultation with local health officials as needed.

- If food is offered at any event, have pre-packaged boxes or bags for each attendee whenever possible, instead of a buffet or family-style meal.
- Avoid food offerings when it is being shared from common dishes.
- Train all clergy and staff in the above safety actions. Consider conducting the training virtually, or, if in-person, ensure that social distancing is maintained.

Monitoring and preparing

- Encourage staff or congregants who are sick to stay at home. Plan for when a staff member or congregant becomes sick.
- Identify an area to separate anyone who exhibits COVID-like symptoms during hours of operation and ensure that children are not left without adult supervision.
- Establish procedures for safely transporting anyone who becomes sick at the facility to their home or a health-care facility.
- Notify local health officials if a person diagnosed with COVID-19 has been in the facility and communicate with staff and congregants about potential exposure while maintaining confidentiality as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or other applicable laws in accordance with religious practices.
- Inform those with exposure to a person diagnosed with COVID-19 to stay home and self-monitor for symptoms, and follow CDC guidance if symptoms develop.
- Close off areas used by the sick person and do not use the area until it after cleaning and disinfection; wait 24 hours to clean and disinfect to reduce risk to individuals cleaning. If it is not possible to wait 24 hours, wait as long as possible before cleaning and disinfecting. Ensure safe and correct application of disinfectants and keep disinfectant products away from children.
- Advise sick staff and congregants not to return to the facility until they have met CDC's criteria to discontinue home isolation.

Maintain healthy operations

- Implement flexible sick leave and related flexible policies and practices for staff (e.g., allow work from home, if feasible).
- Monitor absenteeism and create a roster of trained back-up staff. Designate a staff person to be responsible for responding to COVID-19 concerns. Employees should know who this person is and how to contact them.
- In the event a person diagnosed with COVID-19 is determined to have been in the building and poses a risk to the community, it is strongly suggested to close, then properly clean and disinfect the area and the building where the individual was present.

- Communicate clearly with staff and congregants about actions being taken to protect their health.

What It Means: Your reaction to this guidance will depend on what you were expecting from the federal government. Some pastors and elders may have thought the lifting of restrictions would mean a return to normal procedures and practices. If so, the CDC’s vision of sermons being delivered to half-empty pews full of people wearing face masks may come as a shock.

But most church leaders are likely expecting that the “new normal” will be look strange. For those planners, this latest guidance by the CDC (which mostly restates commonsensical coronavirus practices) may seem underwhelming. What the guidance underscores it that the civil authorities will not be handing down a plan that can be easily adopted and implemented by our churches.

Instead, we must rely on our people—both those in our congregation and also members of the larger body of Christ—to plan for how to protect our churches. Fortunately, we are up to the task. As Paul says in Ephesians, when Jesus ascended on high, he “gave gifts to his people” (4:8). We can trust that the Lord has gifted his people with the wisdom and skills necessary to prepare for what comes next.

Doing so, however, may require that we set aside our need to maintain control and our aversion to input from outsiders. We may need to make policy decision based on the wisdom of fellow believers who we may disagree with on substantive matters, such as baptism or ecclesiology. Can we come together for the good of God’s people? If we can, we may find that church in the time of COVID-19 may be a time of both social distancing and also gospel-centered unity.

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CHRISTIAN LIVING

My Wedding Plans Changed. God Didn’t.

APRIL 29, 2020

| **STEPHANIE GREER**

Wedding season is upon us, but this time it's different. Spring usually brings bridal showers and bachelor and bachelorette parties. It usually brings dress fittings and last-minute details for the big day. It brings the anticipation of seeing friends and family from all over—together in one place to celebrate the union of a new couple. But in the era of COVID-19, spring's showers fall like tears.

My fiancé and I were about 40 days from our wedding date when we began to realize that our initial plan wasn't going to be realized. In two weeks, our wedding guest list plummeted from 250 to 100 to 50. We ended up with 8.

Throughout our planning, we knew this event wasn't ultimately about us. We genuinely wanted God to be glorified; we spent time praying for him to be exalted during both the preparation process and also the wedding itself. We sought wise counsel, we pursued purity, and we tried to be frugal with our expenses. Doing all those things didn't add a drop of righteousness to my fiancé and me. Doing all those things didn't guarantee everything would go right. But, to be honest, I sometimes believed it would.

In the end, we got married in a small, livestreamed ceremony that looked nothing like the wedding of my dreams. And God was still good.

If you're engaged to be married and discouraged by the upheaval of your plans this spring or summer, I want to offer some encouragement. Behind a frowning providence, God does indeed hide a smiling face.

Here are three things he's been reminding me in this season.

1. It's ok to grieve.

When our wedding plans were first threatened, I immediately sought to regain control. I spent several hours trying to figure out loopholes, then frantically texting family and church friends with prayer requests. My anxiety only increased. Eventually, I gave up.

But accepting defeat brought additional complications. Amid all that was going on in the world, I knew that my ruined wedding plans weren't the worst trial. I felt guilty for being sad.

As I sought the Lord in prayer, James 1 came to mind. James was writing to the scattered "twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (v. 1) who were dealing with worlds of struggle (vv. 2–3). They needed to know God was in control (vv. 17–18), that he wasn't being sneaky or malicious (v. 13), and more

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importantly that he was at work in them (v. 18). As they encountered “trials of various kinds” (v. 2)—both large and small—God was accomplishing his good purposes.

There are aspects of our wedding I so badly wish I could have had. We were excited that our unsaved guests would be able to hear the gospel. We were looking forward to being physically surrounded by members of both our families. I was looking forward to my dad walking me down the aisle. And the dancing! Oh, we were looking forward to the dancing!

These wedding trials may not be the largest trials in the world right now, but they are counted among the “various kinds” (v. 2) that God’s people experience. We can acknowledge our sadness—grieving the loss of good things we anticipated—and find comfort in our unchanging God. When all our plans fall through, he is still the “Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (v. 17).

2. A wedding isn’t just about the wedding.

My fiancé and I decided to get married on April 3. We had cake, a bouquet filled with my favorite flowers, and hand sanitizer. Our pastor and the individuals from our household were physically present in my former backyard.

As I began to walk out to Gungor’s “Vous Êtes Mon Cœur,” I saw my groom standing there crying. It was there I realized God had given us everything we needed. Our former expectations of decorations, table arrangements, and appetizers didn’t matter. Our commitment before God was of first importance. God used an unpolished, backyard wedding for eight to teach me about the beauty of becoming Mrs. Greer. Although our wedding wasn’t like anything that we had planned, it was perfect.

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My COVID-19 wedding stripped me of both comforts and also idols. And while it was painful, it was also a blessing. One dashed plan after another gave me a chance to examine if I was more enthralled with the idea of a wedding than with marriage. As the pressures and expectations of the big day were

removed, I grew more and more confident that my fiancé was the right one for me. I can’t help but think God allowed this so I would have more opportunity to examine my future life decisions. As a result, my soul became anchored in the Lord, not in any person or plan. Could he be doing the same for you?

3. Look forward to a greater celebration.

An unpolished wedding also produced a longing in me for the day we get to celebrate the covenant between Christ and his bride. And if my less-than-ideal earthly wedding is how God prepares my heart to feast at his heavenly banquet, then I will gladly take it.

When our pastor gave his charge, he referenced Christ's sacrifice. In the greatest sacrifice ever made, God loved us so much that he gave his only Son so that we might have eternal life ([John 3:16](#)). Now we await our coming King, the bridegroom who is coming back for those eagerly awaiting him ([Heb. 9:28](#)).

When I stare at that truth, worldly trials hold no eternal weight. They are but reminders of the fact that God will one day welcome us to his eternal home, and it will be the greatest celebration we have ever known ([Matt. 25:34](#)).

“And if my less-than-ideal earthly wedding is how God prepares my heart to feast at his heavenly banquet, then I will gladly take it.”



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