

As States Reopen, Should Churches Return to 'Business as Usual'?

After more than two months of stringent lockdown orders, churches across America are finally beginning to reopen, a welcome sign to millions of people of faith who have been waiting for the chance to gather and worship together.

I witnessed this excitement recently during our first service at the church I pastor in Sacramento. Because of state restrictions, we were only allowed to let 100 people inside our 1,000-person auditorium, but being inside the room, worshipping together, even if it was 6 feet apart, felt like a breath of fresh air.

Yet as churches begin to slowly resume services, we should ask ourselves: Should we return to business as usual?

For many of us, "church" over the years has become synonymous with steeples, programs, music and attire. But to the first believers, the church meant an intimate, family-centric community of faith.

The book of Acts, which documents the early days of the church, says these men and women "broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people" (Acts 2:46b-47a, NIV).

In fact, the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, which Christians around the world recently celebrated, occurred while they were in one of these homes.

Again, the book of Acts says, "When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the

blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting" (Acts 2:1-2).

From my perspective as a pastor, one of the silver linings of the COVID-19 pandemic is that it has forced us to once again make our homes places of worship.

Nowadays, churches have specialized ministries for every age group—from preschoolers to college-age students and even the elderly—and for life's different stages, such as gatherings for mothers, fathers and professional-aged single men and women. These ministries provide a wonderful service to our community, but over time, we have allowed them to replace the home as the primary place where we learn spiritual values.

Recovering the sanctity of our homes matters, because what happens in the intimacy of this space is reflected outside in our society. It is in our homes where parents should teach their children that racism is wrong, that there is dignity in every type of work, that every human life—including the unborn—has value and that loving our neighbor is one of our greatest callings. It is in our homes, too, where we learn that we have a civic responsibility to appreciate our individual rights and freedoms as Americans and to make our nation a better, more just society.

Of course, sometimes our family members drive us crazy. Sharing a living space with others is not always easy, and sadly it can cause us to distance ourselves from those who are closest to us. But I hope COVID-19 has slowed down our lives and given us an opportunity to get to know one another again.

Maybe there are old wounds that need to be healed and tough, honest conversations that need to be discussed. Maybe we need to relearn how to talk with one another and enjoy each other's company. Whatever may need to be fixed or addressed, let's not waste this opportunity to do so and make up for any lost time.

So, before we rush back to business as usual next Sunday,

let's take a moment to remember that the church is not a building or a service. It is a vibrant, diverse community of people, which at its very heart is built by families. {eo}

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