

If You're Returning to Church, Here Are 10 Ways to Stay Safe

An evangelical research center focused on disaster response has detailed key steps churchgoers might take as they contemplate attending reopened churches.

Wheaton College's Humanitarian Disaster Institute in Illinois released a series of documents this week to augment the guidelines of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The institute previously created a website with coronavirus-related resources with the National Association of Evangelicals.

"We are standing in the gap with a series of new resources since the CDC has been suppressed by the current administration on what guidelines it can provide to U.S. faith communities," Jamie Aten, executive director of the institute, said in a Wednesday (June 10) announcement about "Deciding When & How You Should Return to Church in Person: A Practical Guide for Church Members."

"Many churches including their pastors and church members are struggling to sort through misinformation and divisive voices because of the lack of detailed COVID-19 guidance for faith communities being provided at the federal level needed to navigate reopening churches safely."

The new resources follow other initiatives, such as an ecumenical document released Sunday (June 7) by a consultation of mainline Protestant and Catholic experts, to help church leaders cope with the many questions swirling around reopening churches.

The resources include a 22-page guide—noting the need to be

committed to humility, love, persistence and wisdom—and shorter checklists for members and leaders deciding whether to reapproach the doors of their churches.

Here are 10 tips from the guide:

1. Keep getting updated on the latest about COVID-19.

“There is a rapidly expanding body of scientific knowledge about COVID-19. Experts agree that COVID-19 will be in the US for the foreseeable future, with fluctuating levels of infection in the community. Until a vaccine is available, the virus and the disease will be a threat to our public health.”

2. Stay home if you are concerned about the risks.

“Remember that if you are uncomfortable with the possible risks, you can continue to attend virtual gatherings. Moreover, if you fall into the high-risk category, you should plan on continuing to attend virtual gatherings. If you don’t understand the plans in place, ask for clarification or humbly share with your church why you decided not to attend in person at this time.”

3. Speak up to others posing a risk.

“If you think they might be unknowingly taking risks with their safety, it is important to lovingly, patiently and humbly share your concerns with them. You can pray for them. You can share with them expert advice like this guide or another resource to help them make their own decision. And you can respect that they may not follow your advice.”

4. Strive for unity amid different views.

“Some in your church will have very similar ideas to you about the reopening process. Others will likely feel very differently, while others are unsure quite what to think. ... Find how you can help to nurture unity during the stages of reopening and remember those who are suffering among you.”

5. Take a mask and sanitizer with you.

“Wash your hands before leaving and after returning home from church (remember your mask needs to be washed after wearing it to church).”

6. Be physically distant in parking lot as well as sanctuary.

“Put on your mask and check in the vehicle’s mirror to make sure your mask is properly secured. Use hand sanitizer before exiting your vehicle and again after the service before you head home. Observe social distancing recommendations even while exiting and entering your vehicle, making sure to give space to others as they are exiting or entering their vehicles. Be sure to maintain recommended distancing with others as you walk through the parking lot or sidewalk to the church building and when returning to your vehicle.”

7. Heed cautions about singing.

“Remember that many health care professionals, scientists and choir organizations consider singing and choirs a high-risk activity.”

8. Forgo physical contact.

“Avoid ‘high touch’ activities (for example, greeting with a handshake, passing a collection plate from person to person).”

9. Notify church officials of symptoms.

“If you or others you are staying with start to show signs or symptoms of COVID-19 after attending an in-person church service, consult a health care professional and notify your church leadership.”

10. Be patient.

“Reopening is complex, and the church has to consider many factors and take on many new tasks. Patience is one of the

fruits of the spirit (Gal. 5:22) that we all need a lot of these days. We should also be humble, understanding that none of us completely understand the nature of COVID-19, and others will likely have very different perspectives than our own. Don't compromise safety, but be patient and humble."

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