

A Guide to Safely Reopening Church Facilities

By [Alison Istnick](#)

From parking lots and restrooms to common areas and worship, Church Works Studio and GFF Architects offer guidelines for managing a safe and healthy environment for returning congregants.

As a rule, this summer looks to be a time of staying at home and connecting at home. But as states begin to reassess COVID-19 restrictions and closures of non-essential businesses, church leaders are busy figuring out how to reconfigure church processes to provide a healthy and safe environment.

Welcoming people back into worship facilities will certainly not be a one-size-fits-all formula. Since houses of worship aren't required to open up their buildings to visitors, there will undoubtedly be churches who will continue to operate virtually -- online -- feeling that it's in the best interest of their membership to keep their facility closed. When a church does make the decision to reopen its physical doors, the former ministry model may have to be replaced with one that accommodates local and state government restrictions that may change.

Stephen Pickard, Principal with GFF in Dallas, Texas, and Jacquelyn Block, Associate Principal with GFF who lead their Church Works studio and focus exclusively on the planning and design of faith-based

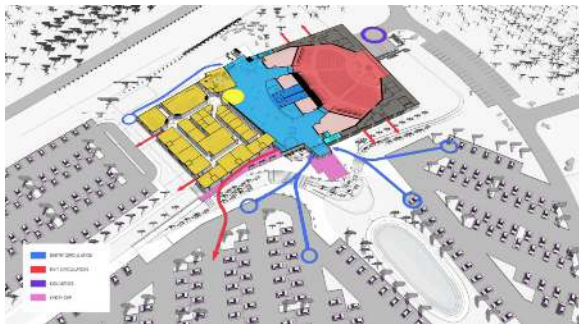
facilities across the country have been working closely alongside faith communities throughout the COVID-19 outbreak.

“Many churches have shifted their ministry focus during this Pandemic but are now beginning to contemplate and plan for the reintegration process,” says Pickard. To assist faith communities, Pickard and Block have been working with churches to set some general recommendations for reopening processes and procedures.



According to Block, even before COVID – 19 stay at home restrictions, Americans were spending approximately 90 percent of their time inside – indoor air quality and biological contaminants, including bacteria, viruses, dust, mites, and pollen have always had a large impact on the health of occupants. “The current global pandemic is creating the need for a new planning and design precedent to better adapt our buildings for a new way of life. This includes how we work, how we learn, how we congregate and how we worship,” says Block.

With the present challenges of social distancing, disinfecting, and monitoring for signs of illness, ministry leaders will be responsible to make changes in facilities and processes to ensure the health and safety of occupants. Abiding with current governing mandates and communicating with the congregation will help people feel comfortable returning to church facilities to Worship. Openly communicating with the congregation about changes being made surrounding church services and events will be key in building that confidence. Read below for recommendations and ideas to help your church ministry as you reopen your facilities.



1. PARKING AND SIDEWALKS

- a. First impressions start in the parking lot. Make sure everything looks fresh, clean, and tidy for when people return.
- b. Consider parking vehicles every other space to encourage social distancing.
- c. Direct traffic on sidewalks in one direction and consider allowing extra time in between services for first service

attendees to exit the parking lot prior to the second service arrival.

- d. In inevitable high traffic areas, sidewalk width may need to increase to accommodate two-way traffic and social distancing.

- e. Place greeters outside the building to help direct guests.

- f. Consider hosting a drive-in parking lot for those who are not comfortable coming into the building in addition to your live streaming.

2. LOBBY/RECEPTION/Common AREAS

- a. Provide touch-free entries into the building by using automatic touchless doors or doors on hold opens (if allowed by code).

- b. Use all entries and exits for quick and easy ingress and egress.

- c. Provide hand hygiene stations to wash hands or provide hand sanitizer stations throughout the building.

- d. In prominent locations, place safety banners as reminders for how COVID-19 spreads.

- e. Provide an area to receive deliveries that is further away from the larger building population.

- f. Add taller plexiglass protection panels at the transaction part of the welcome or reception desk to separate the receptionist from the visitor.

g. Use colored carpet squares or floor decals to remind people to distance 6'.

h. Reconfigure your furniture, so seats are at least 6' apart. Use easy to clean furniture and declutter for easy disinfecting.

i. Avoid overly complicated designs for high-touch surfaces like door handles and hand railings, as these are more difficult to clean.

j. Inside, direct foot traffic in one single direction where possible. In corridors remove any furnishings, planter, or benches to help widen the area to help individuals with distancing.

k. Encourage people to use stairs instead of the elevator. If you have two stairwells, use one for up traffic and one for down traffic. Only allow one family unit in the elevator at a time.

l. Use touch-free lights and temperature controls throughout the building.

3. KIDS SPACES – ENTRY/EXIT

a. Use touch-free children's check in (voice automation control systems or by personal cell phone).

b. Stagger arrival and drop off times to avoid crowds and lines. Used color carpet tiles or markers on the floor to distance parents waiting for pickup or drop off.

c. For church daycare consider having parents' drop-off and pickup outside of the

facility to limit the number of people entering the building.

4. CLASSROOMS

a. Space furniture out to provide 6' of social distancing.

b. Turn desks and tables to face the same direction instead of facing each other to reduce transmission. Stagger tables and chairs in rows.

c. Use visual aids to illustrate traffic flow and appropriate social distancing.

d. Use carpet tiles or markers on the floor to designate appropriately distanced placements for smaller groups.

e. In large rooms, use portable barriers to separate the room into smaller spaces and limit the number of kids in each space.

f. Provide sanitizing stations with cleaning supplies – disinfectant wipes, phone cleaners, hand sanitizers, etc. Make sure these are safely stored and out of children's reach.

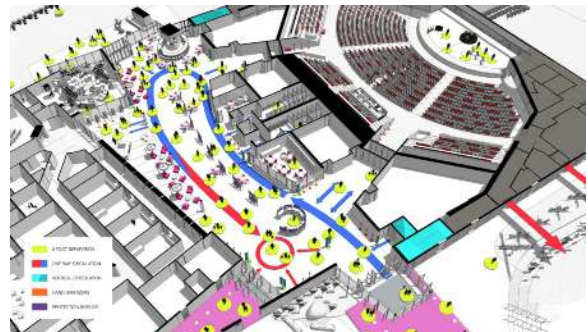
g. Calculate the max occupancy of the room to maintain social distancing by dividing the net usable area by 36. Example: 720 sq. ft. /36 = 20 occupants.



5. WORSHIP

- a. Provide online registration and provide more services if necessary, to accommodate the number of people wanting to attend in person.
- b. Place signage above each worship center door to easily identify entrances for volunteers who are giving directions.
- c. Adjust the seating capacity of the Worship space to accommodate social distancing. Typically, this means to seat every other row and maintain 3 empty seats between each family unit. To increase your seating capacity, you could live stream the service into your Commons or classroom spaces and/or have a parking lot service.
- d. Clearly identify each row that will be available for seating by placing a bright neon round sticker on the floor.
- e. Place offering boxes at all exits instead of passing around an offering plate.

- f. Allow more time for people to enter the Worship space and to slowly exit, maintaining 6' distance between family units.
- g. You may need to adjust your Worship service times to allow the high traffic areas and Worship space to be sanitized in between services.
- h. Continue to have a strong virtual service and community as some people will not feel comfortable attending in person for a while or you may be required to limit the number of attendees due to regulations.
- i. We anticipate a trend towards smaller, intimate Worship spaces with more square footage per person. Before COVID-19 we were seeing more churches go to multi-sites instead of larger venues.



6. OFFICE & ADMINISTRATION

- a. Encourage staff to declutter areas and keep their desks sparse, making it easier to clean and disinfect.
- b. Have a 6' foot traffic routing plan to make sure traffic flows are safe. Use arrows

on the floor to indicate the direction of traffic.

c. Open office areas:

- Space desk at least 6' apart.
- Add an expandable cubicle guard on partitions.
- Stagger desks so they are not facing each other
- Add portable barriers to separate spaces into smaller zones.
- Use different colored carpet circles at people's workstation to designate the 6' zone.

d. Remove some chairs out of conference rooms to encourage social distancing.

e. Allow people to work at home or in other spaces in the building – Can people work in the commons/lobby or in a classroom that is vacant during the week?

f. Provide conveniently located sanitization stations with cleaning supplies – disinfectant wipes, phone cleaners, etc.

g. There may be a trend away from the 'open plan' office layout and 'desk hoteling'.

7. RESTROOMS

a. Monitor the number of people that are entering and exiting.

b. Provide hands-free soap dispensers, faucets, and paper towel dispensers in restrooms.

c. Provide the right quantity of sinks spaced out properly to maintain social distancing (possibly taping over every other sink).

d. For future remodels or construction, public restrooms can be designed without doors (similar to airport restrooms) if sightlines are carefully studied during design. If your public restrooms require doors for privacy or sound control, consider adding foot operated door so people can open the door with their foot.

e. Provide hands-free light controls.

f. Select easy to clean and durable finishes. Non-porous, smooth surfaces like stainless steel or quartz are easier to clean and disinfect than porous surfaces like natural stone.

g. Disinfection during and after each worship experience.

8. GENERAL/SERVICE:

a. Provide adequate space for janitorial cleaning supplies and make sure they are conveniently located to reduce the travel time to get supplies.

9 SITE/OUTDOOR SPACE

a. Access to green space is important for mental and physical health. Consider providing spaces for meditation, prayer and contemplation outside.

b. Provide open space for the community to use.

c. Using outdoors is a great way to maximize your space with smaller budget.

In nice weather, could you have classes outdoors? Could you have bible study outside? Consider what other events could be hosted outside.

d. Space outdoor furniture to encourage 6' social distancing.

