



Thomas Alexander Insurance Agency & Associates Inc.  
Dhea Simpkins, President



## *Before We Gather*

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# How to Communicate as Your Church Resumes Normal Operations

## Address Fears, Answer Questions, and Improve Connection

During this time of coronavirus, communication has been a key factor in keeping people connected. As your ministry makes plans to resume normal operations, ongoing communication with your employees, volunteers, and congregation remains an important element. Open communication about what to expect and any changes you plan to implement will help alleviate fear and anxiety. Ask yourself what *you'd* want to know, if you were a greeter, staff member, elderly church member, etc. Then, develop answers. You'll soon have a long list of things to say. Here's some guidance to help you get started.

## Don't wait

It's important to start painting a broad picture of your ministry's plans for resuming normal operations as soon as possible. With some states lifting shelter-in-place orders in early May, people will have a lot of questions about how to safely gather for church services and community activities. Transparency is key. You don't have to explain every nuance, but it's important to provide enough details to reassure each segment of your audience.

## Communicate often

Communicate as often as you can, through as many channels as possible. Even if you don't know all of the answers, it's important to share what you do know and be honest about what you don't. When the air is static with questions, few things fuel anxiety more than silence. It's comforting to know that your leaders are working to address concerns, even if they don't have solutions yet. More than half of the employees polled in late March said they would like daily coronavirus updates from their employer.\*

## Develop a core message

If you haven't already, develop a core message. It might reiterate your ministry's values or mission or simply provide reassurance. Ministry leaders will face numerous hurdles as they strive to resume normal operations. Having a core message helps you to express empathy and support over time.

## Segment your audience

List each audience you'll address, along with their information needs. Most ministries have at least three groups: staff, volunteers, and church attendees. While your first message about resuming normal operations may be broad enough for the congregation, successive ones will need to include details tailored to each group of people. Don't forget to highlight information specific to vulnerable individuals, who are at higher risk for illness from coronavirus.

## Topics to address

While details will differ by ministry, most organizations will need to address topics such as scheduling, logistics, sanitation, social distancing, and any changes in their operating procedures. Here are some points to consider for staff, volunteers, and attendees:

### Staff

If any ministry staff are working from home, it will be helpful for them to have a plan for returning to the office. Some issues to address may include:

- **Timing.** How soon will employees be expected to return to the office? Will everyone come back at once, or will the process be phased or staggered? What options are available to staff members caring for children or vulnerable people?

- **Disease mitigation.** What efforts are being taken to sanitize the workplace and protect employees against illness? Are there any new social distancing requirements? Will masks or other protective gear be needed?
- **Vulnerable people.** Are any special accommodations being made for employees who are vulnerable to illness? May they work from home or return to the office at a later date than other staff?
- **Furloughed or laid-off employees.** What are the plans for bringing back any furloughed or laid-off employees? How soon might this happen? Will staff resume their former positions? What steps have been taken to ensure that the ministry follows a fair process for deciding who comes back first, next, and so on? What changes might staff encounter, when they return to work?

## Volunteers

- **Changes.** What should volunteers expect upon their return? Will they need to wear masks and gloves? Sanitize children's areas differently? Avoid shaking hands or passing an offering plate? How will greeters' roles change? What measures should volunteers take to protect themselves and others to prevent disease spread? Will you have new or existing volunteer roles to fill?
- **Disease mitigation.** What measures are the ministry taking to reduce the likelihood that volunteers get sick while carrying out their duties? Will certain high-touch ministries, like child care, be suspended or altered in order to safeguard volunteers?

## Attendees

- **Logistics.** Will you hold in-person church services? Will you continue offering online services or alternative ways of connecting remotely? Will you do both, for some period of time? If so, how long will you offer off-site services for people who are too ill or too afraid to resume meeting with others? Have any weekend service times or locations changed? What's happening to mid-week gatherings, such as Bible studies, small groups, or youth activities?
- **Social distancing.** Will there be guidelines addressing how close people are allowed to sit near each other at church or for activities? Must they avoid shaking hands or stand a certain distance apart when talking to one another?
- **Disease mitigation.** What sanitation measures will the ministry implement to help prevent the spread of coronavirus? What areas will be sanitized? How often?
- **Changes.** What changes should people expect? Will communion be served differently? How will offerings be taken? Will there be coffee and donuts? Should parents of small children expect child care to be available, right away?

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- **Vulnerable people.** What efforts are being made to protect people who are elderly, pregnant, or who have chronic lung disease? Some people may need to avoid all social gatherings – even worship services in other’s homes – until there’s a vaccine for coronavirus. How does the church plan to minister to this group of people?

## Remember the big picture

You won’t be able to answer every conceivable question. That’s okay. Just do your best to thoughtfully consider the concerns that may come up and address them as best as you can. Every church is trying to figure out how to safely resume meeting together again. You’re in good company. It’s important to stay calm, keep the faith, and stay the course.