



“Re-Opening Church Wisely and Re-Imagining Forward”

May 12, 2020

The church of the future is HERE! We could never have anticipated its full arrival so quickly. We have been talking about the change in culture. We have been addressing the necessary shifts that will be required. We have mourned the demise of some of what we knew and loved. Some have “dabbled” with online expressions of church. AND THEN ... COVID-19! It has forced our hand. We now are embracing what we might have previously resisted. We are doing what we have never done before. We are climbing learning curves that are mountainous. God is up to a new thing if we will watch and listen and JOIN HIM!

*God is up to a new thing if
we will watch and listen
and JOIN HIM!*

This document is an attempt to help churches take steps toward what many are calling, “a new normal”. Many things will never quite be the same. In fact many things should never be the same. We are called by Jesus to be His Church in THIS day. The pandemic that we are IN is an opportunity to re-shape ourselves as the Church of Jesus. It is forcing us to ask deep questions about who we really are as the church. What really is integral to “being” a local congregation? Can we re-imagine forward and see opportunities to be re-shaped for Kingdom effectiveness in our neighbourhoods?

As regions across Canada begin to think about re-emerging and re-opening, how can the church re-open wisely and intentionally so that we don’t miss the opportunity to join God in what he is up to NOW? The truth is this: The CHURCH never closed!

It cannot be that we seek to “return to normal” but rather re-imagine a “new normal” in our neighbourhoods as the Church of Jesus.

This document has a focus on the PRESENT with an eye to the FUTURE! It cannot be that we seek to “return to normal” but rather re-imagine a “new normal” in our neighbourhoods as the Church of Jesus. In all likelihood that will look different than our past.

As we consider some potential phases of re-opening, we also want to highlight some of the issues and questions that need to be considered. In the CBAC, we have churches of 9-900 people. We have rural and urban. We have churches with mainly seniors and others that are mainly young families. A “one-size-fits-all” approach will not work. Each congregation will need to determine an individualized path for their congregation.

A large Canadian retail store, in considering their re-opening highlighted 3 priorities:

1. **Priority #1:** Pro-Activity
2. **Priority #2:** Safety
3. **Priority #3:** Flexibility

Those are foundational values for churches as well. We need to be pro-active. We need a plan and a strategy. If we don't gather as a leadership team to determine clear steps for our congregation, we will put people at risk.

Safety must be at the forefront of any plan. The virus is highly contagious and deadly. A second wave is not out of the question. We must consider how we safely implement all parts of our strategy so that we do not put people at unnecessary risk.

Whatever plan we devise, it MUST be flexible. Things change rapidly. Regulations can shift daily. We must build into our plan lots of space for contingency and plans B & C.

As your church considers a re-opening strategy it will be important to keep the following understandings in view:

1. *Slower is better. Hurry is risky.* While people are longing for community, they are not desiring large gatherings and are somewhat fearful. Much of that fear will continue at least until a vaccine is found.
2. A number of physicians have communicated that perhaps a good rule of thumb is to "stay one step behind the government and our neighborhoods." We want to be fully honouring and respectful of authority on the one hand, and on the other hand, not take the risk of being THAT "gathering" that is responsible for virus spread or initiating a new wave.
3. Fostering a deep sense of safety and having protocols in place to build that security will be essential.
4. Senior Adults will (and should) be slower to return to larger gatherings. How will this affect our re-opening strategy?
5. Stay SAFE does not mean stay AWAY! As we move toward re-engaging in community we can do it safely. What are the protocols that will promote healthy safety and build security for people as they gather?

Four Phase Reopening Strategy

PHASE 1: High Level Distancing: (Red)

Recognizing the anxiety of many, how do we offer an “ease back in” approach?

- Continue with **online gatherings** as our main expression of “church” recognizing that some smaller churches have not been able to engage in that for many reasons.
- Consider what it would look like to develop a **network of “Home Churches”**. Once the guidelines begin to allow groups of 10 or 15+ to meet, what would it look like to gather in a few homes? In a real sense you become a “multi-site church” of house churches. Read Acts 2!
 - In these “home churches” or clusters you could engage children in the worship.
 - In these clusters you could have 2 families invite a couple of other neighbourhood families and see an opportunity for reaching out to neighbours.
 - Some home churches could be “watch parties”. All groups could meet at the same time and have a live-stream house party experience by watching and engaging in the service. Or your church could “produce” the online service and various “home churches” could meet at different times and places and watch together when it is convenient. Others might choose to shape a different type of worship experience for their “Home Church”.
 - A potential next step when regulations allow for up to groups of 25+ for example, might be to gather 2 or 3 “home churches/clusters together. Potentially some provinces might allow gatherings in church building of larger numbers if physical distancing is possible and certain regulations met.
 - Larger churches might feel that they wouldn’t gather again in their facility until perhaps 50-100+ people could be meeting. Smaller churches might be able to gather sooner. However the 10-20 person home church could be the strategy of “gathering” as part of a “new normal”.

- Drive-In Churches could be an option for some. They will allow for a “type” of gathering. It might also be a sporadic, fun celebration event on occasion. Additionally, in certain more rural areas, (where internet is “spotty”) before homes become more accessible in which to meet it might be a helpful option.

Whatever the option chosen, answering essential questions will be critical:

- How can our church best gather during a high-level distancing (red) phase when perhaps gatherings are only allowed up to groups of 10 or maybe 25?
- If it is in a home with 10+ people, what protocols do we expect for homes to be sanitized so as for people to feel safe?
- What type of training would be important for the “home church” hosts?
- What would be the model for our Home Church?
- How we engage children?

PHASE 2: Moderate Level Distancing (Orange)

The size of a congregation and/or the size of the auditorium may impact the choices in Phase 2.

Government regulations could dictate a maximum number than can gather or regulations might indicate a gathering number based up the size of the auditorium and the ability to maintain physical distancing.

For example one church of 80 people said that if conditions were relaxed to the point of allowing up to 50 people to gather, they would consider holding 2 worship services in their auditorium.

That same church facility has a capacity of 250+. So if the regulation was more surrounding “physical distancing” they might in fact be able to gather as a full congregation sooner.

Other churches that were larger said that they would probably continue with the development of home churches until perhaps groups of 75-100 were allowed to meet. (For example a church of 250 might need to hold 5-6 services to accommodate people in larger worship gathering if the limit is 50.)

Much of this will be determined more clearly as government regulations are unveiled **in individual provinces**. For example. The province of New Brunswick anticipates requiring every church or employer to have a written risk management plan. Samples will be made available by the province.

NOTE: There is a strong sense though that community is the missing piece for most people. Smaller gatherings could meet that need. SLOWER is better than faster in returning to large gatherings.

Community is the missing piece for most people. Smaller gatherings could meet that need.

Churches that begin to gather for worship as groups of 40-50+ (or whatever the size) in their auditorium will need to consider people from the time they ENTER the parking lot until they LEAVE the parking lot:

- Does our parking lot configuration need to change?
- Do we need IN doors and OUT doors?
- Can we make our gathering a “touchless” experience? (ie. The only thing you touch is the seat you sit in.)
- What signage is required to meet government regulations?
- What additional regulations are required in a particular province?
- Do we need multiple gatherings to accommodate our congregation and maintain physical distancing? How many gatherings?
- Do people need to sign up for a particular “worship slot”?
- If we have multiple gatherings, do we shorten our services and what are the best service times so that people coming and going aren’t meeting each other?
- How do we sanitize the facility following each gathering? Washrooms? Door handles?
- How do we keep people distanced in the auditorium when they gather? If we have chairs what is the configuration? If we have pews what do we do?

- Is it even possible to have a children’s ministry and childcare at this point or do we shape a “family-style” worship gathering?
- How does the worship team model physical distancing?
- Are masks expected?
- Is sanitizer available?
- Is the greeting time a thing of the past?
- How do we take the offering?
- What is the new standard greeting? Elbow bump?
- What are guidelines for tellers and counting money?
- Do we have communion during this phase? If so, how?
- Perhaps a survey to the congregation asking about their level of anxiety about returning and what could help that? What would help them feel comfortable entering back into worship? Bringing their children back?
- Youth Ministry: When does the youth ministry begin to gather again in-person? What will that look like?
- Board meetings and committee meetings. Do we begin to reconvene these meetings? Is there a need? In fact are we finding that much of the business at this point can be done in a virtual meeting? How long should that continue?
- What types of new training is necessary for volunteers?

PHASE 3: Limited Level Distancing (Yellow)

Phase 3 could be that phase where larger groups (perhaps 100+ or a number based upon the ability to do physical distancing in a facility) begin to gather again. A key factor will be how safe people are beginning to feel to gather in larger numbers.

At the Phase 3 (yellow) level probably 90% of CBAC churches could be meeting in one gathering.

- All of the questions from Phase 2 will be critical to answer.
- Is it possible at this point to do child-care/children’s ministry during the limited level distancing phase? Or is this still further down the road, perhaps when a vaccine is discovered?
- Can we involve children in the worship gathering in creative ways?

- Can we create an area for infants and parents?
- If it has been our habit to have a pre or post service “coffee-time/café can this be started again? Would we set up tables that are distanced? Should we have self-serve coffee and tea? Will we have self-serve treats and snacks? What about sanitization of this area?

PHASE 4: Continuing Practice: Our NEW NORMAL! (Green)

How do we reimagine our future given what we have learned in this chapter?

As we move through the phases and move into the 4th phase, the question for EVERY church is: How do we reimagine our future given what we have learned in this chapter?

- Will multiple gatherings become part of our congregation’s DNA moving forward? Could “home churches” be legitimate church gatherings tethered to our church? What about other expressions of church? Café Churches or other fresh expressions?
- Will an online expression/worship gathering continue as an option for some to gather and as an entrance point of contact for others? What does digital integration look like for our church in this new day? Was the online option solely a tool to “fill the COVID-19 gap”? Or is it a tool that we embrace moving forward?
- Will the “greeting time” be a thing of the past in our worship services?
- What have we learned about online and automated giving that can serve us well moving forward?
- Is sanitization of the facility a new and necessary reality on a more regular basis?
- Is self-serve coffee a wise practice?
- Should treats and snacks be “buffet-style” or served?
- What is the on-going practice for tellers?
- How do we re-integrate and train volunteers?

Andy Stanley said that often what we encounter, is not a problem to solve but a tension to manage. Perhaps that is our new reality. As we move through this chapter, we need to be pro-active, safe and flexible. We need to honour government guidelines and not push forward so quickly that we become the problem that creates a “second wave”. We also want to seize the opportunity that is before us!

Is God doing a new thing? Has this moment in history forced us to reconsider who we are as the church in our neighbourhood? Can it prompt us to consider what we really value as the church and what it in fact means to BE church in our neighbourhood? Can it help us re-shape a new way of being church in a new day? Let’s not miss and waste the opportunity!

We need to be pro-active, safe and flexible. We need to honour government guidelines and not push forward so quickly that we become the problem that creates a “second wave”. We also want to seize the opportunity that is before us.

Rev. Kevin Vincent
Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada
Kevin.Vincent@baptist-atlantic.ca

(from a conversation with pastors, Borden Scott, Phil Woodworth, Carolyn Steeves, Kevin Matthews, Dave Morehouse, Brandon Thompson)



Re-Opening Church Summary

The Next 3 Months – Action Steps (May-July 2020)

It is impossible to project too distantly with regard to re-opening churches. As well, the four Atlantic Canadian provinces are developing re-opening strategies specific to their own individual province. However as it relates to the next THREE months the following is most likely consistent for all.

1. The main type of corporate gathering for churches will be from an online platform. Churches will need to continue to shape whatever model works for their context.
2. Even in provinces like NB and PEI, it is likely the earliest that small groups will begin to gather will be the end of May. Possibly by the end of May/June small groups of up to 10 people may be able to begin gathering as long as physical distancing guidelines are maintained.
3. Once that occurs, churches can consider the development of some “Home Church Clusters”. Churches should develop some clear training and sanitization protocols for Home Church hosts, so as to alleviate fear and create safe environments.
4. At this point, churches can develop their own “Home Church” model. Some will choose a small group format and allow each gathering to develop their own agenda (perhaps with some available resources). Others will have “watch parties” where they watch the online worship gathering together (either together in a “live” setting or an “on-demand” viewing at a time convenient to the group.)
5. As regulations ease, there will be opportunity to increase the size of these “Home Churches”. Perhaps upwards of 20-30 people could gather if physical distancing is maintained and the setting is large enough. Additionally, churches will begin to consider strategies for their children’s and youth ministry. Will small groups begin to gather for youth? Could a re-shaping of the “Backyard Bible Club” model be used for children rather than a larger Vacation Bible School model?
6. Many larger churches will in all likelihood continue with the “Home Church” model into the fall (perhaps for the remainder of 2020 and in many cases it will become a new strategy long-term). Smaller churches might begin to consider weekend in-person gatherings once groups of 50 are permitted or physical distancing guidelines are more clearly laid out by government. Some will need to consider multiple services to maintain physical distancing. At this point, all of the issues raised in the full “Re-Opening Church” document will need to be addressed and questions answered.

