



COVID-19 (Coronavirus)

How Do Churches Restart Services?

Contributions by Ray Johnston, Dick Alexander,
Sean Morgan, & Brent Storms

In the midst of a global pandemic declared by the World Health Organization (WHO), we wanted to share a few insights and recommendations for pastors and church leaders navigating these unsettling times.

How do churches restart services...when that time comes? That was one of the main topics from a conversation with Pastor Ray Johnston of Bayside Church in Northern California—named 2019's Fastest Growing Church by Outreach Magazine. Ray is also the interim pastor at Willow Creek Community Church.

Rethinking Group Gatherings

Even now guidelines are being released by authorities that shed some light on what reopening America might look like.

- Melinda Gates, reported that those who conduct research for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation are noting that it will be up to 18 months before a vaccine is available.
- In a Seton Hall Sports Poll released this week, 72% of the respondents said they would not attend sporting events until there was a vaccine for the coronavirus, and just 6% of fans said the NFL should keep its usual calendar this year

These insights play significantly into what considerations ministry leaders need to understand. Despite a pending and phased reopening, there is still much fear around gatherings.

Think Like a Church Planter

Brent Storms, President of Orchard Group and church planter, offered insight on why it might be a good idea for church leaders to go through a similar exercise as Bayside—thinking through what a restart after the pandemic could look like:

“Existing churches today may need to prepare for a season that feels a little like the pre-launch phase of church planting. Amidst uncertainty, there's a need to cast vision to create buy-in and build momentum, perhaps in smaller groups.

“Church planters face the same challenge: how do you cast vision in a way that builds buy-in and creates momentum even when so many details about the future are still uncertain? As church planters begin to draw people into community around the mission, they often

Now that pastors have lived through the extraordinary challenge of leading Easter online, attention will begin to turn toward churches eventually reopening their gatherings. Even though there's a growing chorus of medical voices saying large gatherings may be much farther out than we'd thought, it's imperative that leaders prepare for what's ahead.

Ray mentioned that Bayside Church is thinking through strategies church planters use when launching new churches. In particular, how church planting models might produce great results for restarting Bayside. As the founding pastor of Bayside, Ray is no stranger to planting, and under Ray's leadership the church has launched multiple campus plants and mergers.

The Bayside leaders and staff are considering steps they will take by looking at these 4 church planting phases:

- Core Group Meetings
- Preview services
- Preliminary worship services
- Grand opening

don't yet know what the church will be called, where they will meet, when they will launch or how many people will be part of the new church in its first few months.

“It seems to me that all church leaders today face many similar uncertainties:

- When will gatherings be allowed?
- Will they have to be under a certain size?
- When restrictions are fully lifted, will people feel comfortable attending large gatherings like we've been accustomed to?

“There's just so much we don't know.

“Whatever the strategy, the pre-launch phase of every

successful church plant includes discipling new believers, developing leaders, training volunteers, and building community around a shared mission. During the season

we are in, before all the restrictions are lifted, any energy spent by a leader at any church on these priorities will prove to be invaluable, whatever the future holds.”

Critical Questions to Address

Addressing the likely reality that many congregants need to be inspired to make the leap back into gatherings is a critical aspect to knowing your audience—church planters clearly understand this concept, but many church pastors may be presumptive in assuming things will naturally take place.

The idea of reopening your church from the perspective of a church planter is a great exercise for leadership teams. It’s not a one-size-fits-all approach, but we do believe it will help leaders as they assess restarting to keep two critical questions in mind:

1. Your digital reach has increased, and that means reopening needs to be intentionally focused on engaging those who are new. How will you welcome new digital connections into the family of Christ?

2. There will be a residual fear Americans have toward gatherings. How will you address this?

In addition to these two questions, we believe the church must plan to reinvent itself toward:

- Being more relevant and meeting more needs in your surrounding community
- Engaging newcomers in a plethora of digital ways before they physically engage
- 7 day a week discipleship—think both Physical and Digital...“Phygital”

As we continue to discuss with other leaders and hear their perspectives, we will have more to come on these items in subsequent blogs!