

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE OPENING OF EVANGELICAL CHURCH PREMISES

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We live in a time of very rapid change brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Church buildings were closed for two months, but the Lord's Church is still alive and active.

However, this new reality has made us rethink how the so-called "new normal" should be returned, in relation to worship services, our worship meetings and our expression of community, so that we can prudently maintain the safety and care of the brothers and sisters in faith who gather in our congregations. We must also maintain the witness of our churches, as well as the work of evangelism in our communities.

As the legal guidelines, state government, autonomies, and city councils are taking graduate measures for the recovery of the economy and social life, so the Evangelical churches will have to adapt to these changes so that we may update and contextualize the manuals and guidelines to the reality of their context. There will be local and regional particularities to take into account, as well as those specific to each denomination and, undoubtedly, those specific to each local church, so that the guidelines will have to adapt to their reality, to the surface area of the facilities, accessibility, number of members and their ages, and people with risk profiles, etc.

The priorities are clear: first safety and second witness. Generating uncertainty in our social environment with our meetings would be a mistake from which we will hardly recover. The promotion of public health is an ethical duty as believers and as citizens, but it is certain that zero risk will never exist.

We do not believe that we should be the standard-bearers of the return to normality, and we will always go one or two steps after society, so that with prudence and wisdom we may safeguard the safety of members and visitors, as well as testimony before the community.

One last consideration. We must consider not only safety, but also what kind of church we are and want to be, according to the biblical tradition we have. What does it mean for us to close a church? What does it mean that our elderly or sick cannot attend church? What will we do? We must also reflect on children's ministry and other areas of service. The Lord's call to care for His church, His, not ours, should cause us to walk wisely in the fear of the Lord in the decisions we must make during and after this pandemic.

This document is intended to provide guidance to assist us in that goal.

BASIC POINTS FOR DEVELOPING A REOPENING PROTOCOL

1. DEFINE THE OPENING PHASES

It is recommended that a document be drawn up setting out the process for restarting church services, a protocol for safety and hygiene. Each stage will have the duration that each congregation estimate appropriate.

It would be advisable to develop at least three stages:

1. Preparatory stage.

- a. The entire congregation will be taught about the new health and safety standards that are being established. They should not be aware of the new reality just when they arrive

to the first meeting. The use of social networks, videos, communications, small groups and whatever is considered useful, will be of great importance to ensure that all members are informed and trained about the changes that will be established.

- b. A health and safety guide will be developed and made available to the whole church.
- c. Training of a team of ushers or welcome team, so that they can control all the measures exposed in the security protocol.
- d. Training of employees and volunteers.
- e. Preparation of the facilities, place of reception, places of disinfection, etc.

2. Stage of testing.

- a. It is recommended to make a test cult, in which we can test all the processes that we have implemented.
- b. After this it will be prudent to establish two or three more meetings for the adjustment of safety and hygiene measures.

3. Stage of standardization.

In this stage the meetings are standardized and the new measures adopted are considered to be integrated.

2. HYGIENE AND PROTECTION

- a. General cleaning and disinfection protocols. Elaboration of a written plan on cleaning of all facilities, according to the established public health norms.
- b. Present publicity explaining that the appropriate measures are being taken for disinfection before each meeting. It is recommended that a document be publicly displayed guaranteeing the disinfection of the facilities.

3. CONTACT PROTOCOL

- a. Let's not assume that people know. Each concept must be clarified, for example: what does social distancing mean? It is a confusing term, since it refers to physical detachment.
- b. The health and safety document will include all the aspects recommended by the health authorities to mitigate the risk of transmitting COVID-19: physical separation of two meters, no physical contact, use of masks in the entire premises and meetings, limitation of attendance at meetings, use of gel and gloves, etc.

4. COMMUNICATION

We should make the recommendations known to the whole congregation, in written form, orally, through social networks, videos, etc.

5. TESTIMONY AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

- a. Define how we will communicate the plan to the neighbourhood and surrounding community. Good communication will lessen the fears, the uncertainties of people living in the church environment.
- b. In some smaller towns, communication of the safety plan and reopening process to local authorities or police may be appropriate.

6. PLAN TO SERVE GROUPS AT RISK

- a. Older people: Define clear recommendations on their participation in the meetings.
- b. Sick people: Define clear recommendations on their participation in the meetings.
- c. Children: Develop a guide for parents so that they may be clear about how the church will or will not implement children's ministry. The recommendation is that activities of the children's ministry, whatever they may be, should not be started until safety standards for children can be guaranteed.

7. WORSHIP SERVICES

The Protocol will include all aspects related to the cultic life of the church, logically adapted to each congregation. Thus, guidelines will be developed for:

- a. Timetables: Clarity in the schedules of each service or worship.
- b. Ushers: Clear and visible identification of the ushers. They will be trained in the preparation stage. Members and visitors will follow the instructions of the ushers.
- c. Distribution of seats: We ask that families arrive early to accommodate them in their respective seats following the instructions of the ushers. Each family or individual person will be separated two meters from the next one.
- d. Music: Preparation of clear health and safety guidelines.
- e. Holy Dinner: With pre-packaged elements, and if it is not possible members of the congregation will be encouraged to bring the elements from home or other options.
- f. Offerings: Establish other methods that do not involve passing a bag or tray from hand to hand: boxes, mailboxes. The use of available electronic media will be encouraged.
- g. Baptisms: Baptisms may be held if a member of the person's family can baptize; should it not be possible, other creative alternatives will be sought.
- h. Weddings, funerals and other events: Legal precepts will be followed.
- i. Altar calls: There shall be no laying on of hands, or call to the front so as not to provoke crowds. It is recommended to minister from each own's seat, raising the hand or other visible action.
- j. Children's ministry.
- k. Visits: They will also be subject to the security protocol.
- l. New converts: They will be provided with cards or other means where they can leave their contact. They will be followed up via congregazoom. (meetings by internet)

8. STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

- a. Each employee or volunteer will receive the necessary training for the performance of his or her area of service.

- b. The training will be done in a continuous way, starting in the preparation stage.
- c. Volunteers will sign a volunteer document.

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