Small, rural and ethnic church guidance for preparing and reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic

A collaborative paper written by
Rev. Dr. David Wilson (OIMC) and
Rev. Derrek Belase (OKUMC)
May 15, 2020

Small, rural and ethnic churches have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in different ways than their larger, urban and suburban counterparts. Now that we are in the phase of reopening and relaunching, unique tactics and procedures will also be necessary for these churches.

In initial CDC guidance which required groups of no larger than 10 spaced 6 feet apart, many small churches could have continued to meet and comply with the requirement. In the Oklahoma Episcopal Area, that did not happen as our conferences expected local churches to be closed during the pandemic.

As restrictions have been lifted, churches and leaders find themselves in a position to determine:

1) When will it be safe in our community for the church to reopen?
2) What changes will have to be made before we can reopen?
3) What changes will have to be made when we reopen?
4) For how long will those changes be necessary?

Here is what we do know:

1) Informed, medically-guided, data-driven, contextual decisions will be necessary.
2) Before reopening, preparation is important.
3) Becoming clear that this time period might be a “new normal” that lasts longer than we might like it to.
4) Changes might need to be sustainable for the long-term. If they can be lifted, all the better.

The Oklahoma Conference Rural and Smaller Membership Church Commission crafted this guiding statement:

Once CDC guidelines are allowing for bigger groups with social distancing, things become much more contextual. Small membership churches with large sanctuaries can go right back to regular worship once groups of 20 or 30 or 40 are allowed. Other churches will need to have 2 services to allow for social distancing. At such a time having guidelines from the conference would work better than one decision for all churches. Guidelines from the CDC and OKUMC (and OIMC) would be helpful backup for pastors as congregations make decisions about what will be an on-going reopening process.
In his book *Small on Purpose: Life in a Significant Church*\(^1\), professor Lewis Parks writes about small churches and their unique place in the United States’ religious landscape. We know that the Oklahoma Episcopal Area is made up, in both conferences, mostly of small and rural churches.

In chapter 4 of his book, he concludes with an overview of what he calls dynamic equilibrium. He writes, “Through the years I have tried to name the essential characteristics of a small church in dynamic equilibrium both to help churches know what they have going for themselves and to help churches assess when it may be time to disband as a congregation. The most recent list has five elements.”\(^2\)

For the purpose of this paper, we will use his five characteristics and connect the unique position of rural, small and ethnic churches as they consider reopening post-COVID-19.

**Element 1**

**A small church in dynamic equilibrium maintains vital worship.**

Reopening during this pandemic mostly affects worship. What questions need to be asked? What will vital worship look like now?

- What was your average worship attendance before the pandemic? Was it around a number that your sanctuary could still seat, if everyone came back, using proper social distancing? Will there be space for visitors?
- If you have had an online presence during the pandemic, can you continue that when you move back to in-person worship?
- Can you ensure your sanctuary is sanitized safely before your first Sunday of worship and then after it is used each time?
- Who will manage the sanitizing procedures before and after worship? What will that include?
- Will you require masks during worship? What will happen if someone does not wear a mask?
- What will you do about singing, which is a foundational part of worship? There are alternative ways to do so.

*Some tips:*

- Churches need to ensure a way to record the name of every person in the building each time it is open in the case of a positive case of the virus among your people.
- Determine what aspects of worship will be maintained and what will be not be possible until a later time. Communicate the reasons for these decisions.
- If possible, use separate entrances and exits for the facility.
- Leave as many interior doors open as possible to limit personal touch to door handles, etc. and to help provide better air circulation.
- Mark clear pathways on the floor to maintain social distancing and prevent congestion.
- Clean and sanitize every room used by the public after each service.
- Clean all surfaces with soap and water followed by a disinfectant.
- Remove all writing supplies, hymnals, Bibles, etc., to prevent them from being touched by multiple people.

---

\(^1\) Lewis A. Parks, *Small on Purpose: Life in a Significant Church* © 2017, Abingdon Press.

\(^2\) Page 79.
Written orders of worship or bulletins are not recommended. If bulletins are provided, DO NOT take up or reuse them.

No offering plate should be passed. Instead use online giving (when possible), a stationary giving box or mail. Counters should wear gloves/masks.

Element 2

A small church in dynamic equilibrium provides soul care.

Providing pastoral care, including weddings and funerals, have become even more difficult during the pandemic. What questions need to be asked now?

- Funerals and weddings often include many more people than Sunday’s average worship attendance. How will you regulate that? What cultural considerations have to be taken into account?
- What procedures are in place for burials in your cemetery?
- What advice/regulations are local funeral homes offering?
- How are you going to stay in contact with those who cannot come back to worship? What is your plan for pastoral care? How have you been doing that during this time?
- What practices will you have to maintain relationship with those who, for the long-term, feel uncomfortable about being around others?
- How will the sacraments be administered in safe ways?
- How will prayer requests be shared in meaningful ways?
- How will altar calls be handled in worship?

Some tips:

- Develop a communication tree or process so that all people know any plans which have been made.
- Communicate the funeral policy before the need arises so no one is surprised by it.
- Assign members to groups of three to five with a shepherd who is willing to call them regularly and report to the pastor any particular needs which he or she should know.
- Consider using a texting service to stay connected. You can find a free opportunity here.

Element 3

A small church in dynamic equilibrium is a blessing to the community where it finds itself.

Small churches often have a more focused mandate to be connected to the narrative of the community. The pandemic has impacted outreach ministries like food banks, clothes closets, afterschool programs and the like. What is next?

- Which programs can you do safely as your reopen and relaunch? What are other programs in your area doing during this time? What can you learn from them?
- How can people safely enter and exit your building for the programs?
- What new ways might you reach your community based on what has happened during the pandemic? Did another community ministry have to close that you could pick up and continue?
- What are the needs that you have the capacity to do something about?
Some tips:

- Evaluate your own current community ministries. How many people are reached? Could more be reached?
- Do not reopen community ministries until you feel it is safe to do so. Do not succumb to community pressure. Just because someone else opens does not mean you have to open.
- Discuss with other partners how you might work together post-pandemic.
- How will you handle the rituals of meals and food at the church? It is likely that the usual ways many small churches do meals is not safe at all during this time.

Element 4

A small church in dynamic equilibrium passes its faith to the next generation.

Small churches are often generationally driven and honor the children and youth among them. How will the pandemic affect how Christian education and discipleship opportunities occur.

- Some groups where this happens are small by their nature. Could the groups begin meeting even before in-person worship occurs? Or will you wait until after in-person worship begins? It is probably not wise to do both at the same time?
- Could small groups like Sunday school classes, etc... meet at alternative locations? Or outdoors?
- How will you handle your youth group? When will it restart? Can they utilize ZOOM or other technology platforms?
- How will Vacation Bible School be planned for this year? What alternatives might be planned to accomplish the purpose of VBS?

Some tips for the early stages of reopening:

- No in-person meetings of youth, children, or infants.
- Do not provide childcare.
- Postpone in-person Vacation Bible School.
- Look for new ways to connect generations. Create a pen pal program whereby young people connect with those in older generations

Element 5

A small church in dynamic equilibrium maintains its building for holy space and mission.

Buildings are such an important part of our ministries and this pandemic has caused them to be shuttered longer than we could have ever imagined. What will that mean as we begin to reopen?

Element 1 (maintaining worship) and this element are certainly connected in inextricable ways.

- How does your sanctuary and building design allow for easy implementation of social distancing?
- How many services could you have throughout the week or on Sunday to accommodate the number of people who could safely be in the building?
- How will you use the building throughout the week in a safe manner?
• What building improvements might be made now and which might you need to put off until a future date?
• If outside groups are utilizing your building, what will your ongoing relationship with them be? When will you allow them to use the building again? Under what circumstances?

Some tips:

➢ Ensure you have a 1-month supply of cleaning/sanitizing products; have a system in place to reorder items before they are depleted.
➢ Eliminate places to congregate (e.g. store chairs, eliminate coffee stations).
➢ Thoroughly sanitize all surfaces, especially those in high traffic areas.
➢ Develop a congregational seating plan for social distancing; ensure at least 6 feet distance.
➢ Walk through each step of in-person worship multiple times.
➢ Test HVAC systems and prepare them for use whenever people are present to provide ventilation and comfortable temperatures.