



Dear Congregational Leader,

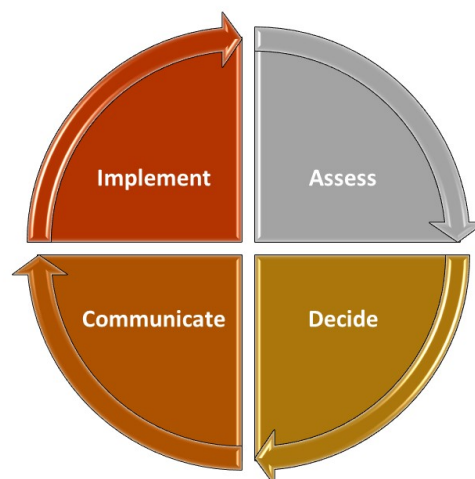
As the nation discusses re-opening businesses and easing gathering restrictions, congregations are beginning to consider similar decisions. As much as I wish this was a simple process, it is not. Government agencies have the authority to tell churches when they can re-open. A congregation should not resume face-to-face worship before federal, state and local authorities deem it safe. However, a congregation should not feel compelled to re-open simply because the government permits it.

Congregational leaders have the final decision-making authority for their places of worship. Congregations must take several steps to ensure the safety of its staff and members. I urge ministers, elders, and church officers to work collaboratively and prayerfully. I pray you will strive for consensus and like the early church you will be able to say, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). This level of discernment requires us to avoid bullying one another, making hasty decisions, and treating this as a partisan contest.

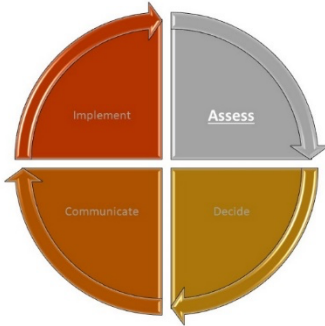
I pray that you do not rush the process. I say that as a confession of my own bad habits. I often allow my sense of urgency to overwhelm patient discernment and collaborative communication. A friend of mine often reminds me to move "at the speed of trust!" Discuss, give yourself time to ponder, revisit and as much as possible, to the extent it depends on you, live peacefully with all (Romans 12:18).

I encourage you to approach your decision making more like cultivating new habits over time rather than planning for a one-time event.

May I suggest a four-part cycle of decision-making: Assess, Decide, Communicate, Implement



Assess



Identify every group which normally accesses your building.

Stay informed about federal, state, county and local regulations and guidance. Pay particular attention to "[Guidelines for Opening America Again](#)" issued by the federal government. This document prepared by the CDC outlines three phases and gating criteria to determine the level of social interaction that is permissible in your setting.

Phase 1—is for states and regions with 14 days of declining COVID-19 cases. Churches who decide to begin meeting again during Phase 1 will need to practice social distancing and personal hygiene especially frequent hand washing and continued use of masks. Vulnerable persons should shelter-in-place and not participate in face-to-face church.

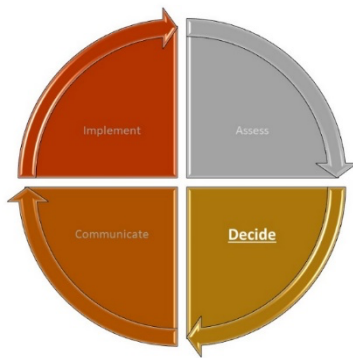
Phase 2—is for states and regions with no evidence of reinfection and continued downward trajectory of flu-like and COVID-like symptomatic cases for a second 14-day period. In other words, Phase 2 is not reached until an area has had 28 days total of declining cases. During Phase 2, vulnerable individuals should continue to remain sheltered in place.

Phase 3—is for states and regions with no evidence of reinfections and reach a third 14-day period of declining flu and COVID-19 cases or 42 days of declining cases. This is when there is the greatest degree of free social interaction though precautions should be taken.

Pay attention to the county-level conditions where your congregation is located **AND** the conditions where your members and staff live.

Assess your congregation's and staff members' personal risk vulnerability. How many of your regular attendees are elderly? Do you have members and staff who are particularly vulnerable because of personal health conditions? Some congregations will want to meet again in face-to-face settings as soon as they are permitted. Some congregations will decide that they will not together until it is safe for everyone.

Decide



Rev. Dr. Suzanne Castle of The Jacksboro Parish has provided a helpful model of creating a table or spreadsheet for each phase to make your decision (see example below).

Create a row for each area of ministry or group that accesses your building (worship, Christian education, mid-week children's program, youth groups, fellowship groups, civic groups, etc.).

Guidelines--Summarize relevant federal, state, county and local guidelines. Pay attention to the county where your church is located **and** the counties from which your members and staff commute.

Congregational Assessment—consider the age, vulnerability (such as people with suppressed immunity), and risk tolerance for the members of your congregation.

Identify the **precautions** you will need to take. Consider: occupancy limits, social distancing capacity, personal practices like social distancing and wearing masks, and others that you deem essential.

Cleaning Practices—how will you thoroughly sanitize the spaces before and after each use?

Staffing—What steps will the congregation take to ensure staff safety and well-being (both physical and mental)? What expectations does the congregation have of staff members?

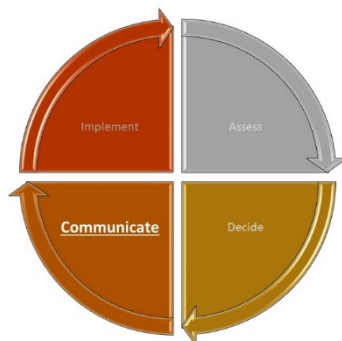
Financial Implications—what costs will be involved in taking the precautions. Be sure to include giving opportunities and procedures.

Communication Plan—how will you communicate these decisions to your staff, congregation, and community?

Example--For readable versions--[Parish Examples in Numbers \(Mac\)](#), [Parish Examples in PDF](#) [Parish Examples in Excel](#), And for usable templates see--[Template in Word](#), [Template in Excel](#)

	Federal, State, County and Local Guidelines	Congregational assessment	Questions to Address	Precautions	Cleaning Practices	Staffing	Financial Implications	Communication Plan
Worship	No more than 10 people in public gatherings and must maintain physical distancing of 6ft. — Encourage everyone to stay at home, especially if medically vulnerable, or have the possibility of carrying home the virus to medically fragile loved ones.	--More than 75% of member over 65. --Three member currently receiving treatments that suppress immunity	—Do we need to go to live worship in the empty sanctuary? — How does this impact volunteers? — How does this impact Suzanne preaching with a mask on? — How does our spotty wifi hurt our replay option —Do we need to do temp checks as people come to worship?	—Online worship option only with recorded sermon and altered plan of music. — Anyone in building needs to wear masks and gloves at all time	—Disinfect every surface touched while in building before departing	—Suzanne & Martha to work through altered worship alternatives	—All online donations only. —Continue with grants/PPP applications	—Elders call every member — Pastoral letter in email — Notifications on FB/Website — Add signage to doors —Forward voicemail calls
Pre-School	Pre-schools are not permitted to be open.		Pre-school will remain closed.		--		--Staff given partial stipend	--Director will communicate with teachers. --Director will call parents and send email.
Pastoral Care	Visits to hospitals and nursing facilities are not currently permitted.	—Can Elders continue to do pastoral follow ups? —If death occurs, Suzanne calls family/ service planned for late summer						

Communicate



Your plans need to be communicated to your members, staff members and community as a whole.

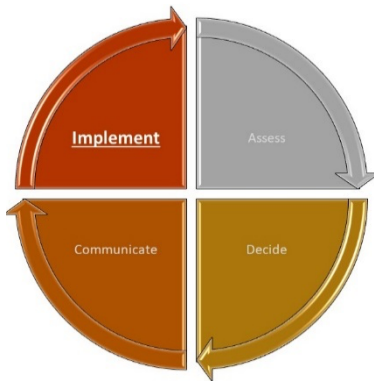
Keep It Simple SOMEHOW. This pandemic is filled with complexity. The decisions you must make are difficult and involve several sources of information. As you plan to communicate to

members, remember most simply want to know specifics for themselves and their family.

Be consistent. Make sure that everyone sharing information is sharing the same information. Those entrusted with sharing information should also listen to concerns and not change the plan without discussion with the other leaders.

Provide the **same message** using many forms. Call members on the phone, share through emails, put it on the congregation's Facebook page and invite members to re-post and Twitter. If you have longer communications to share, consider putting a document on Google Drive or another file-sharing source and offer a shareable link or simply compose a letter. If your decision-making table contains private information about persons including staff persons, it should not be shared publicly. However, a summary document may help some people understand the thought process leaders followed. The main thing to remember is that your messaging needs to be consistent and clear.

Implement



A plan is only as good as your follow-through.

Be prepared to model and enforce social distancing rules, staff protections, mask requirements and other precautions. Your congregation is filled with people you know and love which doubles the challenge of enforcing rules. Still, you are responsible for the safety of everyone.

Make sure that you know the who, what, when, where and how of effective cleaning. Have necessary and appropriate supplies available.

Be prepared to review your practices continually. Week-to-week and as you move from phase to phase your decision-making group needs to regularly communicate about what is working and what is not.

I give thanks to God for the ways you are serving and interacting. I am praying for you daily. Stay safe and trust God.

Sincerely,

Andy Mangum, MDiv, DMin
Regional Minister and President