

Case Studies on Church Operations during COVID-19

Strategies for Re-opening Churches Responsibly after Shelter in Place

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About the Research Team:

Substance is an international multi-site mega-church based in Minnesota. Over 30,000 Minnesotans watch Substance's documentary film-styled sermons every Sunday. We also help lead the Association of Related Churches – an international church planting organization that launches a new church around the world every 4-7 days. We give start-up capital and business planning support for church planting in America, Europe, Southern Africa, Australia, and Asia: See www.substancechurch.com Or www.ArcChurches.com

The Main Goals of this Case Study:

- To help Churches prepare to re-open after Shelter in Place restrictions lift
- To educate leaders on how COVID-19 has affected churches and non-profits
- To further the discussion on best practices that will minimize community spread of COVID-19

How Churches Impact City Economics and Crime:

In order to understand how COVID-19 has affected Churches, it's critical to first understand how churches impact communities in terms of crime, poverty alleviation and economics:

- **The average sized church congregation (200-400 members) brings in \$4.2 million annually into area businesses.** When adding up the economic revenues of events like weddings, funerals, conferences, etc. the indirect economic benefits on gas-stations, restaurants, and other service industries are quite huge. The financial impact of larger churches (3000-4000 members) average an economic benefit of around \$11.2 million annually. – (Cnaan, 2011) – O'Reilly, David. "What's a Churches' economic worth"- http://articles.philly.com/2011-02-01/news/27092987_1_partners-for-sacred-places-congregations-churches
- **For poverty alleviation, the average small church invests around \$140,000 a year into it's community.** (E.g., Food shelves, free financial/legal counseling). Most churches give at least 10% of their budgets back to missions and outreach. (O'Reilly, 2011; *What's a Churches' economic worth* - http://articles.philly.com/2011-02-01/news/27092987_1_partners-for-sacred-places-congregations-churches)
- **Churches are statistically proven to decrease crime rates** – particularly decreasing levels of assault, burglary, larceny (Bainbridge 1989), as well as drug use (Fagan 2006). Property values tend to increase by 6.27% within a half mile radius of a church, known as the "Halo effect."

Top Concerns of Church Pastors:

- **GIVING:** 65% of churches have seen their giving trending downward since the pandemic hit the U.S. <http://www.stateoftheplate.info/index.htm> - Thus, as long as churches aren't able to congregate, it will certainly have an impact on both crime-rates and the economy.
- **DISCRIMINATION:** There's been a significant trend to discriminate against churches and illegally evict them from rental spaces during COVID-19. (see: <https://www.adflegal.org/covid19>) Thousands of churches operate portably in public school auditoriums and movie theaters. Before COVID-19 there had already been a discriminatory trend to prevent churches from having the right to rent public properties (and states like New York have somehow succeeded in making it illegal for churches to meet on public property – which is rather stunning in light of how much public schools need funding). In the Association of Related Churches, we have had over a dozen churches report that, the school districts they are renting from are using COVID-19 to evict them with no reasonable public safety cause. As you would imagine, this is causing many congregations to feel like COVID-19 restrictions are less about "public safety" and more about discriminatory political agendas.

- **SIZE BASED RESTRICTIONS VS. SCIENCE BASED RESTRICTIONS:** When “Shelter at Home” restrictions first started being implemented, many of them seemed to target “group sizes” (Eg., anything over 250 is banned) without really addressing “Group Safety” – which can operate independently of size. (ie., Big does not necessarily mean, “less safe”). These size restrictions are not a surprise as, many of our initial policies were informed by Chinese models where state-bans on group sizes are common (For eg., it’s always illegal for non-state-sanctioned religious and political groups to meet with more than 50 people). So, pastors are worried that state-recommendations won’t evolve into more sophisticated metrics. Churches are extremely different: Their formats, practices and square footage each have a dramatically different impact on the spread of COVID-19. Thus, many church leaders are hoping that *science and safety* will be the guiding principles more than the blunt metrics of *size of meeting*. Leaders want the chance to prove that they can come up with thoughtful solutions that are also a win for public safety.

Unique Considerations for Churches as it pertains to Public Safety:

Because churches vary both in size and practice, government officials have been finding it difficult to find adequate “safety comparisons.” For example, when it comes to the community spread of COVID-19, are churches scientifically more risky than a grocery store? Well, it depends on several critical questions: (1) How big is the church; (2). How large are their services (eg., 2000 people meeting in one big service; or 20 services of 200). (3). How many days of the week do they meet? (4). How might the design or size of their facility affect community spread? (For eg., a large or new facility is more conducive to social distancing than say, a historic church building).

However, if these factors aren’t acknowledged, it can result in a huge amount of unnecessary social tension. For example, most churches have less than 100 members. So, when government officials claim that grocery stores (filled with a thousand people moving products seven days a week) are safer than a one-hundred member church (who only meets for 2 hours, once a week), you can understand why some Christians interpret government guidelines as an unscientific assault on religious freedom.

At the same time, most churches are reasonable: They understand how they increase the spread of viruses: They are filled with hand-shakes and hugs. And when you add in the impact of kids-programming, there are a lot of places where sanitary practices need to be evaluated.

Finding a Solution in Case Studies:

Most churches in the United States have turned to digital church models (i.e., streaming services over the internet). So, at this point, the conversation about “preventing community spread” is all theoretical as almost all larger U.S. churches have not been meeting in their physical locations. Thus, our research has been primarily focused on numerous mega-churches in both Singapore as well as Seoul, South Korea.

Keep in mind, none of these case studies are “time-tested” as many of these countries are only weeks ahead of us. However, these regions have already re-opened churches with attendance numbers as large as 55,000 people. So, there are still many helpful risk mitigation tactics we can glean.

Top Three “Solution Trends” that Churches are Utilizing:

Our research led to 3 primary strategies that churches are utilizing:

(1). A Touchless Visitor Experience: Churches are not like grocery stores (where people touch and move products from place to place). There is no reason why churches couldn’t pull off a “touchless worship experience.” As an application of this, many churches are turning to the following policies:

- Doors propped open (or opened by door-attendants).
- Ropes and Stanchions to create One-way egress/ingress to facilitate people movement
- Touchless communion (eg., pre-packaged communion elements opened by individuals)
- Stationary Offering Boxes (instead of passing offering plates and buckets)

Of course, there are moments when touchless may be impossible, such as bathroom stall doors. Therefore, the second solution trend:

(2). A Constant Sanitizing Process (when touchless is impossible);

The good news is that most churches are only open to the public in limited time windows (such as Sunday mornings / Wednesday nights). Therefore many of them have found it reasonable to hire or recruit sanitation teams who focus on constantly cleaning specific areas (such as restrooms) or Egress/Ingress points (like narrow hallways or hand-railings). To make this easier, many churches are employing additional sanitizing procedures such as:

- Free Cloth Masks / Rubber Gloves
- Hand-washing / sanitizing stations upon entrance
- Touchless Infrared Thermometers (like those used in airports) for kids.

(3). Socially Distant Seating Strategies:

Once again, the problem of community spread is less about *how many people* and more about *how confined is the space* or *how good is the ventilation*. Thus, churches are achieving social distancing the following ways:

- Reducing the overall number of seats – which is becoming increasingly easier as churches are trending away from having pews to having chairs.
- Increasing the overall number of church services – which is already common for churches to do around holidays.
- By utilizing free seat reservation software (like theaters or sporting events use tickets) – enabling families to be able to sit together while simultaneously giving ushers the ability to space groups apart.
- By creating Over-flow Video Rooms: In order to get Occupancy Permits, most churches are required to have significantly more square-footage than most retail stores. Thus, churches tend to have a large number of un-used square-footage relative to their actual occupancy. These space could be perfect for video-overflow rooms if the capacity of the main auditorium is too full.
- By Giving Door Assignments to decrease traffic: (Eg., Last names A-G must enter through Door #2)

For example, at Onnuri Church (a 55,000 member church in Seoul, South Korea), the government requested that they simply reduce the overall capacity by 60%. Thus, at one of their main campuses (that seats 3000 people), they elected to limit service sizes to 700. (see www.onnurienglish.org)

One of the questions we asked pastors was: *“Would a 60% reduction in seating capacity feel Draconian to you in America?”* Many of them didn’t think so. Part of the reason is because, most church services already naturally cap out at around 70-80%. And because Americans own more cars than ever, most churches tend to struggle with parking capacity way before hitting seating capacity. Thus, would they rather have a 30-40% reduction in capacity verses not meeting at all? For sure. But, as you would imagine, pastors were mixed about this.

Conclusions and Considerations for Minnesota Churches:

Most churches in Minnesota are relatively small in their actual attendance (Less than 200 a week, even if their roster is upwards of 5000 members). Also, most churches in Minnesota tend to reach elderly demographics (most of whom will continue to shelter at home even when churches resume again). Thus, we believe that re-opening churches in Minnesota will be relatively safer in terms of community spread than say, states like Texas where churches tend to be much larger and more youthful.

Naturally, as we’ve educated pastors on the strategies mentioned above, the top question is this: How many of these strategies must a church implement to officially be safe? Or even to “feel safe?” Naturally, there is no easy answer to this. Public opinion will continue to shift with each passing week.

For Further questions and Contact

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