

Mid-Atlantic District
"Which 50? A Look at Re-Opening the Church Building
May 4, 2020

X1 Title Slide

Good Evening, Mid-Atlantic District. It is good to see you this evening. Welcome to all of you!

Let me welcome those on this call this evening. We have Lead Pastors, Associate Pastors, Church Board Secretaries, Retired Pastors, Pastor's Wives and Women in Leadership, District Staff, District Advisory Board and several other guests who are a part of the influence of the District. Welcome to each one of you.

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After nearly 60 days of "stay at home" or quarantine, the question of "*when can churches begin meeting together again?*" is becoming a more familiar question in circles of conversation. Already conversations are underway about when and how we will return to restaurants, gyms, theaters and stores. It is important that we have this conversation about a return to corporate worship in our churches.

X3 Kevin Myers

Kevin Myers of Twelve Stone Church was asked this question yesterday and he gave the best answer to today's big question-"When will we meet in person again?" -his answer:

X4 "As soon as it's safe for the kids-we know they can't stay 6' apart."

X5 Kevin Myers

Here is the thing to understand about flattening the curve. It only works if we take necessary measures before they seem necessary. And if it works, people will think we over-reacted. We have to be willing to look like we over-reacted.

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I admit that I do not understand why Home Depot or Lowe's can be open with hundreds of people filing in and out some wearing masks and others not, and the church can't be open. Trying to solve this issue will prove to be counterproductive to the issues that we are faced with.

I have heard all of the "conspiracy theories" about COVID-19. I have witnessed those that take this seriously and I have seen those who think this is "no big deal." The decision to re-open or

not to re-open the church building will undoubtedly spark spirited conversations that might not always be Spirit-guided. There are deep feelings around this issue and without healthy and robust conversations, they could divide the church at a time when we need to be united.

"Which 50?" A Look at Reopening the Church Building is the topic for our conversation this evening. This hour will be formatted a little differently than our previous Monday evening conversations. Presuming that we will eventually be able to gather in groups not to exceed 50, how do we decide "Which 50?" More important than that is the question of the necessary preparations required to ready our buildings for corporate gatherings of worshippers.

I invited nearly 500 people from across the district to this important conversation this evening. I will open the conversation with a presentation and present several issues that will need to be addressed prior to any announcement of re-opening our buildings. Earlier today, you received a lengthy document containing information and a major checklist of items that must be effectively addressed prior to any decision to re-open.

It could be that we are yet several weeks away from returning to the church building and I know some of you are already engaged in conversations about this with your leaders. Others may be zealously pursuing avenues that will allow the church to gather in the building and may not be fully considering the wide range of issues that must be considered prior to any announcement.

Welcome to this important conversation. As I have already stated, if you know someone else that may benefit from this conversation, I hope you have invited them to join us. My prayer is the information I share will become a catalyst for leadership conversations in your context.

X7 Thank You

So, accept my deep appreciation to you for all that you are doing as you seek to be a "faithful non-anxious" presence in this pandemic.

None of what I am going to share in the next few minutes should elicit fear or a sense of paralyzing panic, rather this information should be used to prepare to return to your church building in an informed way.

X8 blank slide

X9 As leaders we are called to do two things in this new season of ministry. Both involve **"Preparing the Church."**

X10 We are to engage in the task of **"Preparing the Body of Christ"** You have been doing that through a variety of ways.

X11 There is a **little arrow**.

X12 We are also to engage in the task of **"Preparing the Building."**

If no other development arises out of COVID-19 we have begun to have a fresh understanding that the church is really the people, the Body of Christ." Some have even gone as far as to suggest that they have connected in deeper ways that at any time recently.

X13 The task of Preparing the Body of Christ and Preparing the Building must be concurrent events. They must go hand in hand.

Please do not become so focused on "going back to church" that you lose your focus on the Body of Christ.

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X15 **Renew your emphases on "Connecting" People over "Gathering" People.** Remember that you can "gather" and be "disconnected." Continue to pursue ways of "connecting!"

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X17 **How Did We Get Here?**

X18 In a few days/weeks/months we are going to get a "green light" to return to our buildings but, **just because "we can" does that mean "we should"**

When people say "I can't wait to get back to church," it is our responsibility as leaders to help our people distinguish what they mean. Are they saying we just want to back to the building and couch it in terms of back to the building?

Begin now to give careful attention to a "scaled return" with a deep sensitivity to those whose health or circumstances may prevent them from returning with you.

X19 **How Did We Get Here?**

X20 Begin now to ask yourself the question, **"If we return, what will that mean for (fill in the blank?)"**

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Another issue that you as a leader must determine is,

X22 **What information will guide your decisions?** "Who do you trust in terms of information that will guide your decision?" Resist obtaining your information from a person who appears on

Facebook or Social media who is an epidemiologist this week, a health policy advisor last week and an expert on the law and governmental processes the week before. Dare I say that Fox News, CNN and MSNBC might not have the full picture. What I am saying is, develop a filter through which you will gather information and collaborate with others around you to process this data.

X23

I have already received emails, calls and inquiries that ask, *"how soon can we start meeting together?"*

Please remember that when you gather together is a decision for your local church. The District has the responsibility to provide the best information to you so that you and your church leaders can make an informed decision.

I don't know how to answer this question without referring you to local, county, state and federal officials.

X24 However, in recent days I have been thinking about the issue of **Assessing Your Readiness**. Let me give you an example of what I am thinking.

X25 What plans are in place right now to sanitize and sterilize your church building?

Now is the time to do the deep cleaning necessary to welcome your people back. You will demonstrate your seriousness about this if you have already adopted a plan and are actively involved in implementing the plan.

Has your building been readied so that you can return once the gathering precautions are lifted? This includes but is not limited to spraying all seating surfaces with disinfectant, deep cleaning of all floor surfaces, doorknobs and handles, restrooms, Sunday School classes/ worship spaces, entries and exits.

Now is the time for all this to take place, not the week of the "you can go back to church" announcement by government officials.

X26 Secondly, **what's the ongoing plan to clean and sanitize your church in real time?** It's one thing to prepare in advance of people's return to the church building, but how will you keep the place continuously clean and disinfected on at the times when people gather?

X27 Will this require a new ministry team to address this need? Who will walk around wiping doorknobs, surfaces and clean restrooms? What is the budget impact if you cannot develop committed volunteers?

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X29 At A Glance

Let me do a quick run through of some immediate things that must be considered as you think about a return to the building. There are more but these are some of the preliminary thoughts that may be conversation starters.

X30 Restrooms: You must decide whether you will allow bathroom usage at this time. If you don't think you can allow it, then it may not be time to return to the building. If you choose to keep your restrooms open (the Governor's Office recommends keeping them closed), be sure to post signs about washing hands in bathrooms with appropriate guidelines to doing so.

X31 Bulletins: Don't

X32 Coffee: You will need to monitor the guidelines to know when is best to reintroduce these services.

X33 Hand Sanitizer: Hand sanitizer needs to be readily accessible throughout the church. It may be difficult to obtain at this point, so consider if you should meet in person without this element.

X34 Masks: Having these available will help increase people's comfort levels as they return. Again, these may be difficult to obtain, but you could have people make masks as a service to the church.

X35 Greeters

X36 Check List: Begin to develop a check list of what has been cleaned and when it was cleaned so that all areas of the church can be a safe and sanitary space.

X37 blank slide

X38 WHERE ARE WE?

X39 Be prepared to share your church's full-scale return plan before you announce a date to return. This is no time for a *"fly by the seat of your pants"* decision making model.

Each Tuesday morning, I have a Zoom call with my fellow District Superintendents on the Eastern Field along with Dr. Carla Sunberg who serves as our Jurisdictional General Superintendent. In that call we discuss the issues we are facing and as you can imagine, COVID-19 has been front and center.

Last week Dr. Sunberg strongly encouraged the District Superintendents to ask each church to

X40 Contact your local insurance agent to inquire about legal liabilities that may be incurred opening a full-scale return plan.

In a culture that may be inclined to bring litigation against the church, I want to make sure that we are taking this matter both comprehensively and seriously. So, in light of this, I am asking that you make contact with your insurance provider and have them communicate back to you in writing their response.

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X42 Earlier today you received a document entitled, "*Preparing for What's Next...Preparing to Return to the Church Building.*"

X43 It really is a *Checklist For Returning To The Building*

I am grateful to several other District Superintendents that are working with these matters closely and more particularly for their contribution to craft a document to guide their churches. With their permission, I have "cut and pasted" sections of their work, added sections that are contextually appropriate to our district and

"lifted" other ideas from articles that I have read. This is not an original document but synthesizes the work of many. Others reading this document may feel free to do what I have done in an effort to communicate safe steps that can be taken as we step together into unknown territory.

The work you will find following is a "best practices" document that considers a wide range of issues that should become the framework and filter through which a decision can be made to return to the church building.

Please notice the following:

X44 **General Cleaning** on page 2 and 3

X45 **Maintenance** on page 4

X46 **Leadership** on page 4

X47 **Worship** on page 5

X48 **Ministries** on page 5 and 6

X49 **Finances** on page 6 and 7

X50 blank slide

X51 WHERE ARE WE GOING

X52 Congregational Communication: Tell your congregation through flyers on the doors, email, and social media about how you've prepared the church for their arrival. Be sure to use the words "clean, safe, and mindful of health needs and issues in preparation for a non-touch experience" or something similar. Also say that if they are sick, then they should not be present and can join online instead.

X53 Virtual Church: Will you continue offering virtual online worship? Some churches may think of their recent foray into Facebook Live as a means to provide a worship experience for their people a thing of the past - a stopgap measure during some really strange days.

Happy they can meet together again; Facebook Live services may give way to worship experiences on campus. But is that the right strategy? I have heard of church after church whose Leaders tell me their worship attendance and group attendance are up - significantly - because people are finding them online.

There is a tendency to think that what we have been doing as a default way of doing church and we can get back to business. What if virtual church and what you are doing may need to take robust steps forward for those that will not return your church. Have you thought about the fact that new people you are reaching may have no idea of what the inside of your building looks like and may not even care?

X54 Multiple Services: What will you do to continue to reach people you have been reaching who may not enter your doors?

How will you prepare for multiple services to accommodate gathering limits? How will you allow ample time between services to meet the requirements for cleaning, disinfecting and sanitizing?

Should you add and/or shorten worship services to allow for social distancing?

If physical gatherings are limited in size, what are your options:

- (1) offer more services
- (2) encourage people to continue worshipping online
- (3) reposition seating in your worship space to help people avoid close contact.

If your church reopens with the "worship only option, you'll have to decide these things now.

X55 Traffic Patterns: Consider dismissing in an orderly way to ensure social distancing.

Most states are recommending that you have your church members enter the building and immediately go into the worship service to be seated. Others are suggesting that entry be through one door and exit through another.

X56 Staffing Issues: Will a new staff or volunteer position emerge from COVID-19? With church online, what are the implications for staff (paid and volunteer) and how will they be reallocated in light of these new realities? Can churches embrace virtual pastors whose job it is to oversee the technical aspects of the new digital frontier? Will they become responsible to develop groups and strategies to reach people online?

What is your plan when volunteers step down? Some reading that I have done suggest that older volunteers may not return until preventative measures (think vaccines) are not only readily available but widely used. It may be just too risky for them because they are most at risk from COVID-19. Will you be able to fully staff your classes like you did back in February?

X57 Finances: It may be too early to have a perspective on the trendlines on the finances but based on my reading and watching your websites and on-line presence, it seems that this is a central issue of concern. Although you may be reaching a multiplied audience by your virtual presence, this is not translating into the offering plate or online platform.

In light of this, do you have a plan for reducing expenses if your church's offerings don't rebound? Some are suggesting that now is the time for a "budget scrub" while offerings may still be similar or a little lower to what they were pre-pandemic. Recognizing that expenses may be lower because of reduced activities churches need to be thinking, "What if..." - what if our offerings don't hold steady because of rising unemployment of members? Before the church returns to the building, every church needs a "plan B" strategy just in case giving drops in late summer or early fall.

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There are a lot of things that I don't know about ministry in this pandemic, but there are a few things that I am convinced of.

The people who can't wait to get "back to normal" are not prepared for what lies ahead. Their memories of the church gathering are fueled by the sense of isolation that we are facing in this time.

As leaders we also have to be prepared for the psycho-social realities that we will confront as we do receive word that we can gather again. Some who were with us pre-pandemic may not return because they have lost their lives and there was no opportunity to grieve their loss. Others will not be back to church until much deeper into the scaled re-entry. It may be a year or more before we see some of the people who were a part of our worshipping congregations. Others will not be back because they are in the throes of battling with emotional issues that

preclude them joining with others.

X59 Title Slide

That leads me to the last part of my thoughts. Preliminary suggestions are that "scaled re-entry may mean in the first phase the group cannot exceed 50. Which brings me back to the question, "Which 50?"

I am not at all daunted by the challenges that we face as we navigate these "next steps." It will take all of us working collaboratively. It will require some of you that are in geographic proximity to one another to convene conversations about how you will respond collectively to this opportunity.

I pledge my best efforts to guide the conversation, provide "best-practices" and offer //hope-filled'/ prayers and conversations.

Recognizing that this has been a lengthy presentation and that this is a lot of information, I would encourage you to convene your local leaders and share this information with them.

If you have any questions, I want to take time to do the best I can to respond.

Dr. David W. Bowser
Mid-Atlantic District Superintendent