



## Frequently Asked Questions on Texas Church Reopening

*(Answers are based on Governor Greg Abbott's "Open Texas" Phase 1, Order GA-21 "Expanding Openings" and Attorney General Ken Paxton's "Third Revised AG Guidance for Houses of Worship During the COVID-19 Crisis – Final"; both posted at [www.uspastorcouncil.org](http://www.uspastorcouncil.org) )*

***NOTE: These guidelines (not requirements) have been in place since Phase One of Governor Abbott's Open Texas Plan unveiled on April 27, 2020. Thousands of churches either never closed or began reopening at that time and have been open since then, following the recommended protocols.***

***The recent "Reopening Best Practices for Sanctuaries and Faith-Based Organizations" issued by Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner on October 16 are also "guidelines only" and may not be more restrictive than these that have already been in place since April.***

### **May churches now hold worship services in the church building?**

**YES.** As per the Governor's order GA-14 on April 27, "Essential services" shall consist of everything listed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in its Guidance on the Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce, Version 2.0, plus religious services conducted in churches, congregations, and houses of worship."

### **Are churches subject to the 25% capacity limitation related to restaurants, etc.?**

**NO.** These provisions apply ONLY to commercial establishments such as restaurants through Phase 1. Each church's seating capacity is limited only by the individual logistics of your available space using the social distancing guidelines of six feet (or two chairs) in between family units, seating every other row. NOTE: Two or more individuals attending together may sit as a unit. **UPDATE: Many churches are reporting as high as 60% - 100% attendance vs. pre-COVID shutdown numbers.**

### **What are the basic guidelines for seating and attendance?**

**IT'S YOUR SPACE** – Guidelines are "Keep at least two empty seats" between family units and "Alternate rows between attendees". *You can seat as many in your worship space as can be accommodated using these recommendations.*

### **Are facemasks required for congregants, ushers/greeters, worship team, etc?**

**NO.** Governor Abbott at his press conference on April 27 and Lt. Governor Patrick on the Texas Pastor Council Zoom call on April 28 confirmed that masks are not and cannot be required by county or city government for churches. Churches, MAY choose to require facemasks be worn at whatever level each pastor decides fits your demographics but again, there is NO local, state or federal requirement.

**The specific language from the Governor is:** “Every person in Texas shall wear a face covering over the nose and mouth when inside a commercial entity or other building or space open to the public, or when in an outdoor public space, wherever it is not feasible to maintain six feet of social distancing from another person not in the same household; provided, however, that this face-covering requirement does not apply to the following... 9. *any person who is actively providing or obtaining access to religious worship, but wearing a face covering is strongly encouraged;*”

### **May churches reopen children’s church, child care, etc. as well?**

**YES.** Churches are urged to review and follow the guidelines for child care provided by the Centers for Disease Control regarding assessing, staff protections, hygiene, etc.

### **Are online, outdoor and/or parking lot services still advised?**

OPTIONAL. The AG guidelines state that “*Houses of worship should conduct as many activities as possible remotely...*” which include outdoor or drive in services still using social distancing parameters. Each church may choose whether indoor or outdoor at your discretion. Again, churches of every size and demographic are and have been holding services in their church facilities since April.

### **Why are some churches waiting to open while others have long been open or are opening now?**

CHOICE. All of the current guidelines – NOT mandates – point toward allowing each pastor and church to decide when and in what steps to reopen based on what is best for YOU. Church attendance size, facility size/layout, age and health demographics all as an example are different for every church and should be factored in your decision.

### **What about senior citizen attendance?**

Very clearly, the most at risk groups for the most severe impact of COVID-19 are the elderly with fragile health and other ages with fragile health and/or at risk health factors. The guidelines urge churches to, “ 1. *Strongly encourage the at-risk population to watch or participate in the service remotely,*” or “2. *Designate an area inside the facility reserved for the at-risk population, or offer a service for at-risk population attendees only.* ”

### **NEW ITEM:**

### **May churches who meet in public schools and have a lease/rental agreement begin meeting in those schools?**

**YES.** As per Governor Abbott’s **order GA-21, dated May 5**, “*Nothing in this executive order, the DSHS minimum standards, or the joint guidance issued and updated by the attorney general and governor precludes churches, congregations, and houses of worship from using school campuses for their religious services or other allowed services.*”