

The Return of the Gathered Saints from Pandemic Exile

Conversations abound and plans are being made to reopen. It will be important to know local directives and to consider the White House phasing in initiatives as you plan. Each district will need to determine their own direction based on current predictions in their area. A number of district presidents are working together to provide useful information. As we consider initial steps to God's people once again gathering in our sanctuaries across the Florida-Georgia District after the "Stay Home, Stay Safe" due to the COVID-19 pandemic, **we're suggesting that we take a cue from Nehemiah's** return from the Babylonian Exile in order to rebuild the breached wall of Jerusalem. To think that we will simply be going back to business as usual is most likely very short-sighted. Society will have changed. Our people will be changed by their experience(s); and our manner of ministry will be changed: some good, and some difficult to understand at this time.

Nevertheless, we offer the following as a way to think about it and add a few suggestions along the way. We want to express thanks to some thought-starters provided by the Michigan District and through an article by Ken Braddy, Jr., and a Thom Rainer webinar on April 16, 2020. This article may be viewed at <https://kenbraddy.com/2020/04/18/20-questions-your-church-should-answer-before-people-return/>

Nehemiah experienced the following:

1. He got permission from the king and received right of passage and provisions for the work (Neh. 2:4–9).
2. He made a personal evaluation of the situation (context) with a small group of advisors (Neh. 2:11–18).
3. He divided up the work among several team leaders (Neh. 3).
4. He encouraged the many joining in the effort to stand strong against opposition (Neh. 4 and 6).
5. He directed ministry to meet the needs of those in the community who were suffering want (Neh. 5).
6. He kept track of people and accounted for them because people are really important to God (Neh. 7).
7. He arranged for God's Word to be proclaimed that led to repentance and renewal and a celebration that is described in this way: *"The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away" (Neh. 8–12; see esp. 12:43).*
8. He instituted some lasting reforms ... some things would not go back the way they were (Neh. 13).

ONE: He got permission from the king and received right of passage and provisions for the work (Neh. 2:4–9)

- Realize that the return to our "normal" activities of gathering in larger groups will most likely be gradual and regional ... perhaps even county by county. Please LISTEN to state and local authorities, obey the orders, and be prepared to respond.
- How will you respond if only 10 people with social distancing may gather at a time initially? One hundred? Will you offer multiple services in place of one or two?
- How will you recognize social distancing in your sanctuary assuming that is still a reality for the foreseeable future?
- Again, stay informed and follow state and local authorities' guidelines, although difficult.
- Continue, and even increase, the level of sanitizing in your facilities (and among your people) that you were using prior to the stay at home order.

TWO: He made a personal evaluation of the situation (context) with a small group of advisors (Neh. 2:11–18)

- Take time NOW to engage in conversation with your congregation's leaders regarding the planned return of His people to the sanctuary. Do not assume you can simply flip a switch and all will be back to the way it was. Have the conversation now.
- Study your facilities. Should some areas be "off limits" at first? What will be the traffic flow of people between services? Communion? How will we seat people in the sanctuary? Consider: Some are suggesting that 60%-80% of seating capacity may be "full" in people's minds.

- Circuit pastors can also be discussing now some of the details that each is considering. Shared wisdom through conversation will be essential as we serve our people well.
- You may hear that one congregation out in a less populated area of Florida or Georgia is doing one thing while a congregation in an urban area is not able to do the same thing at present. Remember, *context* is critical as we make our way forward. Help your people understand this as well.
- Take time now to consider what actions your leadership team will need to make in order to re-engage with small to larger gatherings. Conversations now will curtail conflicted relationships later. Rule of thumb: “under-promise” and “over-deliver” in regard to ministry offerings on your campus at this stage, taking care to keep in mind the health and well-being of your community.
- Pray with and for your leaders. Affirm them because this is going to be more effort than we can readily imagine.

THREE: He divided up the work among several team leaders (Neh. 3)

- Establish necessary work teams for your unique situation:
 - Worship team
 - Instead of a choir practicing “together” perhaps special music is provided through soloists or family units as a gift to fellow worshippers.
 - Common cup is really not a good idea at this time. How will you distribute the Lord’s Supper?
 - The offering plate will not be passed for the foreseeable future due to the fact that it must touch many hands. How might we make the offering a meaningful part of worship together while practicing proper social distancing?
 - An ongoing technology team may be very useful as many members will still shy away from gatherings for some time to come and therefore your online presence will continue to be helpful and essential.
 - Prayer team:
 - Prayer is an essential element to this process. Bathe every step in prayer!
 - Every church has prayer warriors. Make sure they are praying about any plans to reopen worship in the sanctuary.
 - In addition to your congregational needs, charge them to pray for our national leaders, our medical professionals, first responders, each other—the list can be exhaustive!
 - Maintenance team:
 - Who will take the responsibility to wipe down door handles and faucets, toilet seats and railings during and between gatherings? What equipment do they need? Where will hand sanitizer/wipes be placed and who will keep them in stock?
 - Who will structure the space to respect social distancing restrictions that may well be in place for some time?
 - Hospitality team:
 - How can we show hospitality to members and guests without handshakes and hugs and intimate conversation around the coffee urn?
 - Clear announcements must be made to those who would think it doesn’t apply to them!
 - Coffee may need to be poured and handed out by individuals rather than self- service. Will we even have donuts? If so, you might consider individual plates or ways that many hands are not picking them out of a box.
 - Communication team:
 - Create a team to work with the pastor to make sure information is being communicated in a timely fashion, that it is complete, and accessible.
 - You may already have “social media” for the church. Make sure that it is updated daily, especially with information relative to reopening.

- The pastor should not be the only source of information. It may be wise to have a “point” person who can communicate with members via email, webpage and newsletters, etc., as the official “voice.” This takes pressure off the pastor by directing questions to a specific person responsible for this.
- Keep in mind that in the absence of information, people make it up! It is critical that communication be current and often. You cannot over communicate at this time!
- Financial team:
 - It is very possible that you will need to rethink your entire ministry plan.
 - How will you communicate the financial picture with your people?
 - Communicate understanding.
 - Communicate essential ministries and what the new plan is going forward. (Staff, programs, facilities, mortgage, etc.)
 - Teach biblical stewardship
 - Communicate a passionate plan forward under God’s blessing.
 - Be sure to have sensitivity to those going through personal financial hardship.
- What other teams can you think of that need to be considered?
- What about different groups such as quilters, sewing, and others? How will they meet—if at all?

FOUR: He encouraged the many joining in the effort to stand strong against opposition (Neh. 4 and 6)

- Talk again with your leaders now. Work toward consensus as a team of leaders. Stand together.
 - If you do nothing, you will be criticized by some.
 - If you attempt anything, you will be criticized by some
- Communicate. Communicate. Communicate. Communicate with your people by mail, by phone, by email, by announcement during your recorded services or while livestreaming services.
 - People do not like changes.
 - They really don’t like SURPRISE changes.
 - Let them know that some things will need to be different.
 - Let them know how diligently and prayerfully your leadership team has worked on these needed arrangements for us to come back together in some manner.
 - Express thanks to team members by name in your communications.
- Did we mention “Stand together” (but not too close)! Pray together. Stay in touch, often!

FIVE: He directed ministry to meet the needs of those in the community who were suffering want (Neh. 5)

- Carefully listen to the spiritual and physical and emotional needs of your members. You may be hearing more now than ever before about hurting people.
 - Can you train your Elders to be care-givers?
 - Are personal visits a possibility? Regular phone calls, emails, or even digital face to face formats?
 - Now would be a great time to build prayer teams if you do not have them, or to keep them active prayer groups updated regularly with prayer needs.
 - Is there a family or individual who needs financial assistance in a critical way?
 - Plan ahead as to how the Body of Christ (individual members of it) might be enabled to respond to these needs.
- Carefully listen to your surrounding community for the spiritual, physical, emotional, and social needs being expressed.
 - Now may well be the Church’s finest hour to BE the Church as we respond with service, care, prayer, and the message of hope in Jesus.
 - This is not just the pastor’s job. It will have to be the Body of Christ working together to serve the community in Jesus’ name. We beg you, Pastor, release your people to serve in Jesus’ name however they find means and opportunity.

- Get prepared to respond, but don't wait to respond until you're prepared or you may never respond. God will provide through you as you step out in faith to serve in His name.

SIX: He kept track of people and accounted for them because people are really important to God (Neh. 7)

- Pay close attention to worship attendance by families and individuals as you return to your worship space. This is not only to know who is there but, equally as important, who is not there.
- Be especially aware of seniors and those with continuing health concerns, both in your congregation and in the community. How might ongoing connections be maintained?
- Some will indeed be fearful to return initially for any number of reasons. Do not coerce them or make them additionally stressed because they are not physically in attendance. Reach out to them and give them compassionate encouragement. Do not ignore them. You may well have created some means of pastoral care during this pandemic. Work to keep it robust going forward. Develop a team to work on this and follow through.
- Continue your online presence as you have been doing during this present crisis. There are methods of intelligently determining how many people are receiving the ministry of the Word through this means.
- Study these attendance figures in the sanctuary and online and watch for trends. Adapt your methods without changing your message and observe any effect on the trends.
- Notice especially people who first met your ministry online if/when they show up in your sanctuary. Celebrate and serve them well.
- Notice renewed contacts with former inactive members who may well have "found their way home" through this pandemic crisis. Welcome them and celebrate their return (See Luke 15).
- Discover on your own and/or borrow ideas from others how to track your membership and worship attendance going forward with an on-going online presence.
- Remember: We count people because people count to God.

SEVEN: He arranged for God's Word to be proclaimed that led to repentance and renewal and a celebration that is described in this way: "The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away" (Neh. 8-12; see esp. 12:43)

- Let every weekend worship gathering be a LITTLE EASTER!
 - Let His Spirit create a hunger for fellowship with His people around His Word and Sacraments!
 - Let His Spirit lead us in true repentance for taking our opportunities to gather for granted, or even to have considered such gathering together as an interruption in our busy lives!
 - Let His Spirit create in us a contagious joy that mere walls cannot contain!
- Our joy in the opportunity to gather again with God's people to worship our Savior and to celebrate the saving work of God should be loud and bold.
- Make the praises of God from the lips of his people resound outside the walls of the sanctuary. We have learned that living as His called out people in Jesus is more than gathering together on a Sunday morning! Let us encourage one another to continue to live as His witnesses in our homes and communities.
- Let His Spirit cause us to be contagious with His love and life as we witness to Jesus in new ways and old ways alike.

EIGHT: He instituted some lasting reforms ... some things would not go back the way they were (Neh. 13)

- Some things will have to wait:
 - "Greet one another with a holy kiss."
 - Handshake and/or hugs of greeting.
 - Door greeters in close contact with worshippers arriving.
 - Pastor greeting worshippers at the door with a handshake.
 - Use of the Common Cup when celebrating the Lord's Supper.
 - Sharing of the peace.

- Passing the offering plate.
- Adults packed into a small classroom for Bible class.
 - We encourage Bible classes to continue online with Zoom or Go to Meeting, etc.
 - We encourage Bible classes in adequate space for social distancing requirements.
- Children’s Sunday School or Bible classes in small classroom using shared materials
 - Online options may continue to be the norm for the near future.
 - Provide parents with adequate instruction, directions, and materials for at-home Christ-centered instruction and craft activities for little ones.
- Youth groups may function differently than before, but don’t give up gathering together online, using social media to connect and instruct and serve. Families have been interacting during these days—how might this become part of your youth ministry?
- Vacation Bible School may have to be delayed until later in the summer ... perhaps as a “Going Back to School Celebration” event.
- Some things may need to continue:
 - Face masks
 - Social distancing
 - Intentional care for those needing to stay away from larger groups because of health concerns.
 - Engaging with social media to engage a larger community with the message of the Gospel. Let us not set aside what we’ve been learning! It’s another tool in our ministry tool chest.
 - Concern for our neighbors, whether they are members of our congregation or not. Let us not lose the willingness and compulsion to care for and serve our neighbors in the name of Jesus.
 - The engagement of so many members in caring for one another. Let us continue to encourage every Jesus-follower to be in ministry to those in our fellowship and those who are yet outside of faith in Jesus. We’ve learned some new skills and have built some new spiritual muscle, so let’s stay with it!
 - Online instruction for all ages. Again, we’ve learned so much. Let’s not waste anything that God has enabled us to gain through this experience.
 - Providing opportunity for automated, electronic, or online giving of tithes and offerings.

Obviously, this article could not exhaust all the items that your congregation will need/want to consider and perhaps implement as we come back together after the COVID-19 “Stay Home. Stay Safe” quarantine is lifted. We provide this as a discussion starter for you and your leadership team. In addition to preparing to return to our gathering physically as the fellowship of believers, we encourage you to also engage with at least three specific questions:

- 1. What have we learned about ourselves and the Lord’s ministry through us because of this pandemic?**
- 2. What new or renewed truths have surfaced, and what new skills for ministry have we developed?**
- 3. How might the Holy Spirit want to leverage our learning and our experience to expand His Kingdom’s reign through us, His people?**

Your servant as we serve Jesus, the Lord of the Church,

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