

What Comes Next When Social Restrictions are Lifted (Partially)?

(originally posted by Deven MacDonald, in the FEB Central Pastors Only FaceBook Group, April 15, 2020. Deven is the Lead Pastor at Summerside Church in London.)

It goes without saying that there is a high degree of uncertainty about when the old “normal” will return. No, I’m not talking about life going back *exactly* to how it was before COVID-19 – I think those days are done. What I mean about going back to normal is this: When will social distancing be a thing of the past? When will we be able to meet again as a church? I don’t want to get ahead of the reality of the situation, but I do want to be prepared.

After a number of weeks of online “services,” churches are settling into this new normal. While this unique season offers a number of challenges, it also offers a significant opportunity for our people in their discipleship journeys. Even as churches make great strides in their quality of content and recording, establish new ministry rhythms and routines, and while pastors grow in their comfort level in speaking to a camera, the vast majority of churches and leaders are essentially waiting for a “green-light” to resume the practices and routines that existed before the pandemic began to spread.

What if it’s not going to happen that way?

I’m not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet, but it seems unlikely to me that at some random date a few weeks or even months into the future, that the government will simply lift all social distancing recommendations *and* that everyone will immediately want to come together again in large groups. I think this is going to take time. It’s going to be a process. More than likely, it would seem that one of the steps in the process will be to continue to limit large gatherings, while allowing smaller gatherings.

Are we ready for what comes next?

Currently, most church services and ministries are entirely online. What happens when the more draconian (and many would argue necessary) recommendations are lifted? What happens when groups of 100 are still prevented from meeting, but groups of 20 are deemed safe? What happens when those in the vulnerable population are encouraged to stay

at home, while those without underlying health issues are permitted to gather in smaller groups? Are we ready for the next step in the process of opening our society back up? Are our churches ready?

So, let me clarify the question at hand: *How different will our church services look if we are permitted to gather in groups of 10-20, but no more?* What if this continues for a matter of months?

Let me answer this by exploring how I believe we'll respond at Summerside Community Church.

We will:

1. Continue to record our sermons, making them available Sunday mornings.
2. Encourage our Community Groups to meet on Sunday mornings for a "service" (Word, Worship, Communion, Prayer, etc.). We'll do this and continue to recognize that many of our people (with compromised health issues) are likely meeting in their own homes, with their family or even by themselves. So, whatever we do, it needs to engage both groups and individuals.
3. Help our Community Groups with logistics (childcare, communications, welcoming new members, flow and liturgy, giving, etc.). I think we'll develop an Order of Service for our groups to encourage them and provide some guidance.

I believe that this interim season has, again, offered both challenges and opportunities. For many of our Group Leaders, this will be a tremendous challenge. For others, it will be a fantastic opportunity to explore their giftings and be used by God.

Questions to consider:

- How will we care for our children in our homes on Sunday morning? (Think Child Protection Policy, content and curriculum.)
- How will we ensure worship music is part of our gathering?
- Should we pre-record music and broadcast it along with the sermon?

- Should we encourage the group to handle the music themselves? What if one group lacks musicians or strong vocalist? Should we sing the same songs or allow the worship leader of the group to make the selections?

· How will we care for people from our church who have not yet joined a community group?

- Will we be able to have a “small service” at the church building? If so, how will we limit the number of people who show up?

· How will we continue to engage our community with the gospel?

· How will we help our Community Group Leaders flourish in this new role? This would be a big responsibility yet also a great growth opportunity for many of our leaders.

I’m not really advocating for any one model, but I am suggesting that we be prepared for the next step in the possible roll back on the restrictions placed on our gatherings.

How will you prepare for the next step and this new normal? What will the week-to-week ministry of your church look like if you’re able to meet in groups of 10-20 (or whatever!), but not as one body?