

“Reopening the Church” Summary Notes

PaLM NY/NJ Pastors Fellowship, June 4, 2020
Over Zoom

This written summary is provided by the facilitator, Milton Eng. The full audio recording is available at the PaLM website: <https://www.palmny.org/2020-nycwf.html>. The following summary does not claim to be inerrant. Points are summarized in topical order not in the order of the discussion.

Milton is East Coast Project Director for ISAAC “Innovative Space for Asian American Christianity” a parachurch ministry serving English Ministries in the NY and NJ area (www.isaacweb.org/east). He is also a Hebrew Bible scholar (Ph.D., Drew), co-editor of Devotions on the Hebrew Bible (Zondervan, 2015) and long-time guest-speaker in our local region. He may be reached at miltoneng@isaacweb.org.

1. When should we reopen?

- As of June 4th, Governor Murphy of NJ had announced that gatherings of 10 people or less were allowed indoors, 25 or less outdoors. [*Update: Governor Murphy announced on Tuesday, June 9th, that gatherings of 50 or less are allowed indoors or 100 or less outdoors.] Phase One will begin on June 9th in New York City. Phase Two will begin in NJ on June 15th. Naturally, NYC churches will reopen later than NJ.
- Milton shared a resource from the Wheaton College Humanitarian Disaster Institute (HDI) mentioned in the CCA Stephen Ko Webinar [Guide to Reopening Church Services](#).
- Chinese congregations are very conservative often with multi-generational households and most will not reopen worship services until September or later when public schools reopen.
- Some are tracking various timelines including: CDC, state guidelines, public schools, vaccine progress. Some are monitoring comfort levels; e.g., as people go back to work they may feel more comfortable going back to church.
- Nevertheless, some churches are beginning to allow this very month of June small groups and fellowships to meet in person but outdoors, e.g. the church backyard with access to the church bathrooms.

2. Protocols for Reopening Small Group Meetings

- The HDI Manual says risk for small groups is lower but to minimize risk (a) keep group members constant, (2) keep within same age group.
- On meeting indoors: issues to consider

- ventilation
- limits on attendance due to social distancing; for example, a sanctuary seating 88 can only seat 12 with social distancing
- Regarding Liability Waivers? Most seem to say “no” or “not needed” for a church!
- Need to manage expectations: coming back will not be the same (don’t hug each other; no buffet meals, etc.)

3. Protocols for Reopening Worship Services

- Advice from the CCA Stephen Ko webinar was shared: greeters may need to screen people, contactless protocols (no bulletin papers), praise team just one vocalist with plexiglass barrier, limit attendance (25 people per 1000 sq. feet; a bit more when families sit together); reimagining space and seating arrangement; rethink service days and times with longer time between services for cleaning, tracking software called “Breeze”, bathrooms is a big concern (install touch free faucets, soap dispensers, turn off forced air hand dryers).
- What if another outside congregation shares the same sanctuary?
- What about congregational singing? CDC first said singing is a bad idea because of aerosol transmission but it was removed in latest guidelines. Stephen Ko shared that wearing mask will prevent strong singing anyway; so, just sing internally, softly, hum along.
- Whenever churches reopen, most will offer hybrid services, i.e., both in person and streaming online.

4. Other Important Discussion Points

- Many addressed larger, big-picture issues. What is God teaching us? Many said that the closing of church has enabled and ‘forced’ us to grow deeper in discipleship during the week with greater attendance at Zoom meetings, more training and raising up of new leaders for small group ministry. Some said they like it better this way!
- Others noted how the closing of church like the closing of companies has led to a decentralization of organization and ministry by the people like home worship. We don’t rely on Sunday Church, the pastor and program oriented religion. The early church had no buildings till the third century AD.
- Others warned that while attendance online may be up, accountability is down. People hide behind their screens with their video turned off and they hop in and out of the Zoom meeting. Some attend their Zoom online services in their pajamas.
- Others challenged the pastors to think boldly and not simply follow CDC guidelines, etc. Can we eliminate all risk? People go to work and endure risk. Yet we don’t wanna go to church to worship God and endure risk? How can we do effective evangelism without human contact? This is not God’s vision for his church.
- This is the opportunity to do things differently.