



Guidelines for Restarting In-Person Youth Gatherings

As schools across South Carolina continue to wrestle with appropriate levels of opening amid the COVID-19 pandemic, many questions have emerged among church leaders in the S.C. Annual Conference about when and how to relaunch in-person youth ministry activities.

There is always some risk involved in ministry – particularly youth ministry. As church leaders, our goal is to minimize risk to the best of our ability. Clearly, the easiest and safest way to minimize the risk of contracting COVID-19 is to avoid gathering in-person.

That said, there is a growing desire among youth and youth workers to meet in person, much as churches have begun to gather in worship. For that to happen, youth leaders and church leadership must be diligent in creating as safe an environment as possible.

This document offers best practices for churches to consider when restarting in an effective and – most importantly – safe way that, to the best of our ability, protects young people and adult leadership from COVID-19.

Before we delve into specific guidelines, it is important to remember:

- The decision to restart in-person youth ministry is a local church decision that should be made in consultation with church leadership. This includes, but is not limited to, the senior pastor, Church Council, your COVID-19 restart team and any other pertinent leadership within your context.
- Some areas of our conference are deemed “[hot spots](#)” by the state Department of Health and Environmental Control that might increase the risks associated with gatherings and therefore would delay restarting youth ministry for local churches in those areas. Please make informed decisions based on [current local statistics](#) and information that is readily available concerning positive cases, percentages and hospitalizations.
- [Safe Sanctuaries policies](#) should be reviewed and volunteers should be reminded of these policies as plans are made for transitioning back to in-person programming. A shortage of volunteers is a possibility as high-risk adults will remain home. Some changes in policy might need to be considered in order to reduce the possibility of spreading infection.

Safety Recommendations

- Youth programming should follow U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines for [sanitation](#), safety, group size and [social distancing](#).
- Guidelines and procedures for deep cleaning and regular sanitizing of all spaces used for youth ministries should be developed prior to in-person events and programs restarting.
- When possible, youth gatherings should be held outdoors.
- All staff, volunteers and youth should [wear face coverings](#) and maintain at least 6 feet of physical distance from all present, whether gatherings are indoors or outdoors. (Those who live in the same household can be considered a “family unit” and can be within 6 feet of one another – but they must wear a face covering at all times.) Consider marking 6-foot spaces on the floor with tape to help remind youth of social distancing requirements.
- Develop a plan for providing:
 - [Face coverings](#) for youth and adults who arrive without one.
 - Hand sanitizer that all participants apply as they enter the space.
- Since contracting COVID-19 involves both distance from infected persons and duration of exposure, it is recommended that you limit the length of gatherings to as short a duration of time as possible. Longer gatherings create a greater possibility for spreading COVID-19.
- When possible, refrain from using shared objects. If that is impossible, develop a plan to disinfect objects between uses.
- Whether indoors or outdoors, a space of 36 square feet should be accounted per “family unit” in attendance to allow adequate space for physically distancing, as recommended by the CDC.
- Those attending off-site retreats, outings, missions and other youth trips should not travel together.
- Overnight retreats, trips or missions are not recommended, due to the need for shared sleeping spaces and bathrooms and extended time spent indoors.

Best Practices for Restarting Youth Gatherings

- Limit to 50 the number of youth and adults attending any in-person events and programs. Require prior registration for those planning to attend, and cap registration at 50. (This limit could change if state regulations change).
- Take attendance at all youth gatherings – including both youth and adults – in case COVID-19 tracing needs to occur.
- Food should not be provided at youth gatherings. If food is necessary, those in attendance should bring their own or boxed/bag lunches can be served.
- While youth appear to be less vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 than other age groups, be aware that some children and teens have are underlying condition that make them vulnerable and others are in regular contact with someone who is vulnerable. It is vital to provide ministry opportunities for those who are not able to attend or are not comfortable attending in person.
- If a youth attending a gathering is found to have tested positive for COVID-19, refrain from gathering in person for AT LEAST 14 days and follow these CDC guidelines: [“Plan for when a staff member or congregant becomes sick.”](#)

Questions?

If you have any questions about these guidelines, please contact Chris Lynch at clynch@umcsc.org.