



**CHURCH  
AMBASSADOR  
NETWORK**

## **Guidance for In-Person Church Gatherings in Pennsylvania**

We all recognize the desire to gather again at church to worship together. This document is intended to speak to the *law* regarding reopening. In pointing out that the Governor's office is respecting the freedom for churches to meet, we do *not* suggest that answers the questions of 1) whether it is advisable to meet as a matter of safety or 2) how meeting will impact your witness within your community. Each church should thoughtfully consider all applicable health advice and guidelines as well as your particular congregation and community.

**CDC In-Person Meeting Guidelines for Communities of Faith:** CDC offers general considerations to help communities of faith discern how best to practice their beliefs while keeping their staff and congregations safe. [Click here to access the document.](#)

### **Pennsylvania Statements Pertaining to Churches**

**5/27/20, Governor's Updated Church Guidance:** The Governor's most recent guidelines for counties in the Green Phase:

- Any gathering for a planned or spontaneous event of greater than 250 individuals is prohibited. This includes, but is not limited to, a concert, festival, fair, conference, sporting event, movie showing, or theater performance.
- Churches, synagogues, temples, mosques and other places of congregational worship are specifically excluded from the limitations established by the order. These institutions are strongly encouraged to enforce social distancing and other mitigation measures such as masking at their gatherings.
- Visitation to prisons and hospitals may resume subject to the discretion of the facility. Visitors who interact with residents and patients must be diligent regarding hygiene. Given the critical importance of limiting COVID-19 exposure in nursing homes, nursing home visitation restrictions will initially remain in place.<sup>1</sup>

**5/15/20, Governor's Updated Church Guidance:** On Friday, May 15, the Governor added a question to the Life-Sustaining Business FAQ<sup>2</sup> document that gave some additional clarity and guidance for churches in PA:

### ***Are religious institutions required to suspend in-person gatherings?***

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<sup>1</sup> [Find the full details here.](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Find this document here.](#)

The Governor's and Secretary of Health's Non-Life Sustaining Business Closure Orders (as amended), the Governor's Process to Reopen Pennsylvania plan, or the Governor's Stay at Home Order *are not applicable to religious institutions*. However, religious leaders are *encouraged* to find alternatives to in-person gatherings and to avoid endangering their congregants.

In counties that have been designated as in the Red Phase, individuals are *encouraged* not to gather in religious buildings or homes for services or celebrations. In counties that have been designated as in the Yellow Phase, *while not required for religious gatherings*, individuals are *encouraged* to limit gatherings for services or celebrations to no more than 25 people.

(emphasis added). This language clarifies that churches are not subject to the Stay at Home Order. *Therefore, churches may meet*. Prior to this clarification, many churches as well as law enforcement were unclear as to whether the 25-person limit applied to churches. It does not.

This advice is similar to what was received on May 5 from the Pennsylvania Secretary of Health. The Secretary reaffirmed to church leaders on a call regarding COVID-19 that there is no prohibition on churches meeting, but if they do meet, it is recommended they follow the guidance applicable to essential businesses that can be open. These guidelines include cleaning requirements, distance requirements, mitigation, and mask requirements, just to name a few.<sup>3</sup> On that call the Secretary stated that the occupancy requirements of other essential businesses (no greater than 50%) also applied to churches. In providing for social distancing, most churches will find that they are able to have far less than 50% occupancy.

NOTE: Again, this *legal* clarity should NOT be viewed as *health and safety* advice. While there is legal leeway to meet, pastors must continue to consider what is safe for their congregations and what will serve your church's reputation in your particular community. We also advise any church planning to open to be transparent with local law enforcement out of respect to them and in order to avoid any surprises during your worship service.

In conclusion, the key theme from the administration is that while churches are permitted to meet, they are encouraged to find alternative methods to in person gatherings. If a church does conduct in person gatherings, the Secretary of Health highly recommended it review and follow the employee and interaction with the public guidance applicable to businesses that are permitted to be open.

*The Church Ambassador Network is a project of the Pennsylvania Family Institute.*

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<sup>3</sup> Here is a list of some of the safety guidelines for essential buildings/facilities in PA: [press release](#) and [business procedures by phase website](#) and [PDF guidance for businesses permitted to operate](#).