

# RETURN

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A Resource to  
Prepare Churches  
and Christian  
Organizations  
for the New  
Normal of  
COVID-19  
Ministry.

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## Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a great toll on nearly every nation of the world. Apart from the risk and threat of infection, nations have faced the consequences of enforced social distancing—and the church has not been immune to these consequences.

### Major Takeaways of the Document:

- **The need for decision making based on precedent is just as important now as it was at the beginning of this pandemic.** Now, more than ever, church and denominational leaders must focus on long-term outcomes based on their organization's mission and the personal calling of their parishioners.
- **It is important for leaders to challenge their congregations and staff to live faithful in the new normal.** The routines and lifestyles that, for many, were rooted in comfort and convenience have now shifted, leaving many asking hard questions about their faith, their endeavors, and even the meaning of their lives. Church leaders have a unique opportunity to not only preach Truth, but also to help their members “re-count the cost” (Luke 14:25-24) of trusting in the Living God and serving Him with their lives.
- **Ministry leaders must determine what next steps look like for their ministries based on what the landscape shows them locally, regionally, and nationally.** Leaders must filter that landscape through the lens of their culture, values, and ethos in order to make decisions that empower their organization's mission as they seek to ensure the safety of parishioners and staff.
- **Being cognizant of the reality that churches and Christian organizations must endeavor to contain the virus upon opening does not mean we have to be paralyzed by it.** God is indeed sovereign and has authority over every manner of disease. We must trust in the Lord as we seek wisdom in next steps as leaders define God's will in these days.
- **God is sovereign over the “X factors.** Often, we try to solve equations based on simple math:  $A + B = C$ . Instead, we must use a different equation:  $A + (B/X) = C$ . This equation requires us to solve for X. In this equation we see that X is NECESSARY for mission success because the Lord is sovereign over the X factors impacting our ministries and lives.
- **It is important to understand not only what threats or concerns the new normal provides us, but also what risks our churches and organizations are willing to accept toward Gospel obedience.** Times of great challenge force believers to choose whether they will hold the Gospel as their highest value or place other values and priorities before the call.



## How to Use This Document

This document is intended for ministry leaders of both churches and Christian organizations. While not comprehensive, keeping in line with the principles of Security In the Context of Ministry (SICM)<sup>1</sup>, I have endeavored to place the Gospel as the highest value of this document and the safety of God's people as the highest priority. This, in turn, should empower the highest precedent of this document: Great Commission Obedience—from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

When it comes to security and Scripture, we do not want to take Scripture out of context and “wrap” a sacred text around a secular safety or security principle. In other words, we do not want to justify secular safety and security principles, or even our own personal leanings on a matter, with a weak scriptural foundation. On the contrary, there *is* a place for secular safety and security principles in ministry (Luke 16:9), but that is not the goal with SICM.

More than once, I have seen well-meaning security leaders create friction within churches and Christian organizations because they took Scripture out of context to justify an action or response to a threat. Sadly, this approach not only damaged their credibility, but also undermined their ability to connect their vision for Gospel obedience with those on the ground doing ministry in hard places. This was because field workers who knew the Scriptures and their right application began questioning the sincerity and integrity of security managers and, in some cases, organizational leaders.

It is critical that we continue to bathe the matters of safety, security, and Gospel obedience in prayer as we seek agreement in the new normal of ministry during pandemic. From our decision making towards return to operations, to praying for local, state, and national leaders, we must set prayer as a priority for each of us individually and corporately. Remember, God is not the author of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33). This is true not only of our worship, but also of all aspects of our lives, including decision making during times of uncertainty. Through prayer, wisdom, and agreement, it is my hope that ministry leaders can lead their churches and organizations into a new season of bold ministry for our Lord as we each count the cost of obedience in this new normal.

Finally, this document will often use words and titles such as “organization leaders” and “church leaders” interchangeably. That said, there are separate sections addressing a return to church ministries in the new normal and, essentially, business continuity for Christian organizations. There is sure to be overlap in recommendations at some level, but I have endeavored to limit redundancy. As such, there are separate sections addressing safety considerations for churches and Christian organizations.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Security In the Context of Ministry (SICM), please visit:  
[https://www.facebook.com/pg/conciliumonline/photos/?tab=album&album\\_id=656100844540072](https://www.facebook.com/pg/conciliumonline/photos/?tab=album&album_id=656100844540072)

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a great toll on nearly every nation of the world. Apart from the risk and threat of infection, nations have faced the consequences of enforced social distancing. These consequences have impacted not only national economies, but social order as well. Social distancing measures have impacted society, both secular and sacred. The Church has faced many challenges while coping with social distancing and defining a new normal of both fellowship and worship considering COVID-19.

Now, on what appears to be the back end of the pandemic threat in many places (or at least a significant flattening of the infection curve), governments are preparing to loosen social distancing restrictions and allow their citizens to return to a semblance of “normal” activities, including reopening churches, albeit with significant restrictions.

In a previous white paper, I wrote to Christian leaders concerning the challenges of Gospel obedience and strategic analysis of pandemic. In that paper, I stated:

*“Because organizational leaders are dealing with issues and concerns of personnel safety, snap decisions based on limited information, and exacerbated by raw emotion, should certainly be avoided. With pandemics, the only certainty seems to be UNCERTAINTY. Therefore, decision making should be highly influenced by **precedent**. Precedent in this case is defined as “long-term outcomes based on the mission of the organization and personal calling of our personnel, rooted in the values and ethos of the organization. This approach, vs decision-making based on short-term concerns driven by emotion, should influence decision making.”<sup>2</sup>*

The need for decision making based on precedent is just as important now as it was at the beginning of this pandemic. Now, more than ever, church and denominational leaders must focus on long-term outcomes based on their organization’s mission and the personal calling of their parishioners. For some leaders, the impact of COVID-19 may well provide an opportunity to redefine the mission and commitment of their church or organization, brought about by a shift in the values and ethos of parishioners who, after decades of prosperity and comfort, may well realize their drift from the biblical Gospel. This “reality check”<sup>3</sup> may well lead to repentance and reengagement in the biblical mission and mandate of the Church. To that end, it is my intention for this white paper to provide religious leaders with a resource to guide not only reopening church facilities, but also to engage in ministry considering the new normal of COVID-19.

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<sup>2</sup> For a free copy of the paper *Pandemic, Obedience, and the Challenge of Analysis*, please email [info@concilium.us](mailto:info@concilium.us).

<sup>3</sup> “Reality,” defined as God’s holy view of a situation, vs our often tainted and corrupted view that demands we repent and seek to change our views towards those of God through the process of repentance and sanctification.

## Beware the New Normal

As pastors and religious leaders prepare to reopen their doors for not only worship, but also for other ministry programming and business operations, it is important for leaders to challenge their congregations and staff to live faithful in the new normal. This pandemic has impacted every level of social strata in the world with over 3.2 million infections and 232,000+ deaths globally from COVID-19 as of this writing (1/3 of those infections [over 1 million] and more than 1/4 of the fatalities [62,000+] are in the USA). The probability that congregations know someone impacted by COVID-19 is real. Just as bad is the negative economic impact of COVID-19. Millions are out of work and many do not know how or when they will recover. The last three years of significant gains in the global markets has led to the loss of trillions of dollars, gravely impacting seniors and retirees as pensions and retirement incomes disappear. Yes, the work and ministry of the Church is just beginning given the new normal upon us.

Understanding that the lives of parishioners and church goers are still being impacted and influenced by the pandemic is an important part of helping church members adjust to the new normal. The routines and lifestyles that (for many) were rooted in comfort and convenience have now shifted. The fear of infection and death, coupled with a significant loss of income and wealth generating potential, has left many asking hard questions about their faith, their endeavors, and even the meaning of their lives. Church leaders have a unique opportunity to not only preach Truth, but also to help their members “re-count the cost” (Luke 14:25-24) of trusting in the Living God and serving Him with their lives.

In light of this new normal, the encouragement and wisdom of Isaiah 43:19 would seem to have great application, as Isaiah says:

*“Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”<sup>4</sup>*

We can be encouraged that God will make a way. This is not the first pandemic the Church has faced and overcome through God’s providence and the sacrificial obedience of God’s people. And whatever the hardship, be it pandemic, famine, war, or tragedy, God wants to meet us where we are at, lead us through challenging times, and ultimately set our eyes on what is to come instead of what lies behind as He brings us closer to Him. Finally, in the spirit of Ephesians 5:15-18, may we look carefully upon these times and how we walk in them. May we proceed with wisdom, discerning God’s will, and make the best use of the time and opportunities the Lord has given us in these often terrible and evil days.

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<sup>4</sup>The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

## First Steps

As an evangelist and disciple maker, I desire to forge ahead with intrepidity, seeking the Lord for new opportunities to make disciples and make God's name famous. Likewise, as a Gospel-centered security leader, I see the need for prudence rooted in wisdom as denominational leaders cautiously discern next steps in the new normal and "count the cost" of obedience in this new season. Indeed, these two principles (intrepidity and prudence) can and should go hand in hand when counting the cost of obedience.

Moving forward into the new normal, it is important for the watchmen of the Church (those charged with safety and security in churches and Christian organizations based on Ezekiel 33:1-6) to help pastors and organizational leaders define next steps. This includes considering the new social terrain of a post-pandemic world – or the new social terrain resulting from ongoing pandemic concerns in minds of staff and parishioners.

Since this is uncharted territory, ministry leaders must determine what next steps look like for their ministries based on what the landscape shows them locally, regionally, and nationally. Leaders must filter that landscape through the lens of their culture, values, and ethos in order to make decisions that empower the organization's mission as they seek to ensure the safety of parishioners and staff. In other words, next steps should be small ones, bathed in prayer as they are analyzed and processed not only toward reopening, but toward empowering existing ministries and establishing new ones in the new normal.

As church and organizational leaders prepare to return to worship, ministry, and business operations, here are six recommendations for first steps in the reopening process:

- **Review/Update Current Organizational Emergency Operations Plans/Planning.** Apart from the COVID-19 threat, there are still other safety and security threats that need to be abated and mitigated. From basic first aid supplies to operating defibrillators, from child safety to active shooter protocols, from church safety team programs to access control, it is good for churches and organizations to review their emergency operational plans prior to reopening.
- **Review and Implement Local/Municipality Health Codes and Guidelines Prior to Opening.** Reports in March and April 2020 of church leaders and parishioners in several communities facing charges due to violation of local COVID-19 restrictions should remind religious leaders to review local and state ordinances on religious gatherings. Because states and municipalities are so varied in their response to COVID-19, leaders of churches and Christian organizations have a responsibility to "know before" reinstating church services or work/ministry schedules.
- **Develop (and Implement) Personal Protective Policies and Practices.** As part of their duty of care in the new normal, churches and Christian

organizations should develop and implement personal protective policies and practices to protect parishioners and staff members. Provide COVID-19 prevention supplies at your organization (e.g., social distancing in worship centers and work/ministry spaces, disinfect community spaces before and after use, supply restrooms with soap and paper towels/blow driers, provide hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol in key areas, as well as provide facial tissues, trash baskets with plastic liners, and disposable facemasks for at-risk parishioners or staff).

- **Continue Live Streams of Worship Services and Virtual Meetings Through the Summer.** Once worship services resume, live streaming of these services allows parishioners who do not feel comfortable to return in person yet to continue worshipping and feeling connected to the body. Further, live streaming protects the most vulnerable in the congregation as we seek to include them in the life of the church. James 1:27 makes it clear that caring for the most vulnerable in the body (orphans and widows) is “pure and undefiled religion” before God the Father. Likewise, the continued use of virtual meetings inside Christian organizations eliminates the spread of COVID-19 and protects the most vulnerable of our staff.
- **Develop A Dedicated Facility Disinfection Policy/Program.** Most churches have either volunteer or paid janitorial services. In fact, some church members take on these responsibilities because they see it as a ministry and a way to bless the Church as they serve the Lord. In the new normal, there is a need to develop dedicated individuals and/or teams who carry the responsibility of disinfecting community surfaces. From doorknobs to water fountains, sinks to toilets, ALL community areas need to be disinfected before, after, and perhaps even during worship services or other events. Selecting AND training a dedicated team for these duties is critical. Just as critical is EQUIPPING that team with the right cleaning products and safety materials. The Center for Disease Control offers great information on how to disinfect facilities.<sup>5</sup>
- **Address Potential Attrition Concerns Now.** Many churches are staffed by volunteers who are often older and, thus, more susceptible to serious infection. From greeters to Sunday school teachers, senior adults take up a lot of slack in our churches. As these front-line servants are the most susceptible to illness, they are also susceptible to attrition for their own safety. Now is the time to identify the comfort level of volunteers and whether they need to be replaced to ensure ministry continuity.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>



## General Safety Considerations

Once we return to church and work, leaders must understand that the impact and influence of COVID-19 on broader society and local communities will be felt for the foreseeable future. This means there will, undoubtedly, be disagreement between leadership, staff, and parishioners on how to move forward in the new normal. This reality will place decision makers in uncomfortable positions as they balance ministry and business continuity with protecting people. There will be those who want to “get back to normal” and ignore potential health threats, and those who are so cautious moving forward that efforts to build the kingdom may be close to impossible. A balance must be struck.

Once churches and Christian organizations restart ministries and business operations, efforts to contain the virus **MUST** continue in the new normal. To ignore this reality leaves churches and organizations vulnerable to second and third waves of infections and deaths. However, being cognizant of this reality does not mean we have to be paralyzed by it. God is indeed sovereign and has authority over every manner of disease. We must trust in the Lord as we seek wisdom in next steps as leaders define God’s will in these days.

It has been said that “patience is a virtue.” Patience in this case should mean taking a measured approach to moving forward. Undoubtedly, the Lord wants His church to trust Him and step out on faith in obedience to His call. However, the Lord also expects us to be good stewards of what He has given us, namely time, treasure, and life. By pushing the envelope too far, such as reopening before adequate protective measures are put in place or discontinuing protective measures too early to save money, etc., vulnerable members of our congregations and organizations could be left at risk. The worse form of stewardship in this case may well be forcing our members to choose between keeping themselves safe or feeling ostracized for not participating in congregational life. Wisdom and discernment in the new normal of post COVID-19 ministry is critical. May we live by faith and not operate in fear (Romans 1:17; Isaiah 41:10).

# Safety Considerations for Churches

## Worship Accommodation.

It is important to consider and implement social distancing in sanctuaries and worship centers in line with local requirements. Some localities remain limited to gatherings of no more than 10 people while others are following the 6-foot rule. Church leaders should understand and implement safety policies in line with local guidelines to avoid confrontation with authorities. Ideas for social distancing worship services include:

- **Consider Overflow Options.** In churches with one worship service, it may be necessary to accommodate all service attendees by setting up overflow rooms in fellowship halls, gyms, or even educational space like youth areas and Sunday school rooms. In these cases, church members can observe the service via remote feed on a computer, data projector, or TV.
- **Plan Multiple Services.** Some churches already run multiple services to manage capacity issues. Adding additional services allows churches to accommodate numbers while maintaining social distancing. In some cases, to ensure that one service does not become overloaded, assigning worship service “reservations” by Sunday School or Small Group or even family may be necessary. Also, see *Overflow Options* above for capacity issues. In larger churches that run literally thousands of people on a Sunday, other options discussed have included open air parking lot services and even using large tents for overflow. Finally, consider establishing dedicated entrances and exits to worship centers to enforce social distancing.
- **Consider Masks.** In some areas, local government is requiring the wearing of masks in businesses and church services. In these cases, it may be possible to increase capacity when all worship attendees wear a mask. While this is clearly not optimal, it does accommodate more attendees.
- **Choirs/Worship Teams.** Social distancing in the choir loft is not feasible. A similar challenge may be encountered with large worship teams, including worship bands and orchestras. The principle of “less is more” may be a possible solution. Simplifying worship in this new normal is certainly realistic and justified.
- **Tithes and Offerings.** A strong tradition in many churches is “passing the plate” to collect tithes and offerings. It is recommended that this practice be halted in the near term. Alternative options include providing offering plates at the entrances and exits to the worship center, as well as reinforcing with congregants online and electronic giving options.

- **Lord's Supper/Communion.** Churches that traditionally use a common cup for the Lord's Supper must consider other arrangements. Many churches are choosing to use self-contained elements that are distributed to worshipers. Still others are choosing to forgo the Lord's supper altogether for the near future.
- **Baptism.** Undoubtedly, social distancing is impossible for baptism. Churches that choose to continue baptisms at this time should ensure those being baptized are not showing signs or symptoms of illness 24 hours prior to the event. Pastors and elders may choose to wear a facemask and gloves during baptism services.
- **Coffee/Pastry Stations.** Many churches offer coffee and pastries to their members. It is recommended that these stations be shuttered into the midterm.
- **Community Gathering Areas.** Some churches offer fellowship areas where parishioners can gather before and after a worship services (often with coffee and pastry in hand...). Like the coffee station, it might be wise to shutter these areas by removing tables and chairs all together. Parishioners can still meet if they wish but may do so at a safe distance.

## Sunday School/Small Group

Apart from worship, Sunday School and Small Groups are the largest gathering times on Sunday. In most cases, attendees sit closely packed in a room where social distancing is next to impossible. This is leading church leaders to make hard decisions. Some ideas include:

- **Start/Continue Online Sunday School/Small Groups.** Virtual meetings are not optimal, but are helpful to continue fellowship and Bible Studies while protecting the most vulnerable. Additionally, consider online curriculums for virtual Sunday School/Small Groups.
- **Add Sunday School/Small Group Times.** Similar to adding a worship service for social distancing purposes, adding new times for Sunday School is also a possibility.
- **Start New Groups.** When adding new times, perhaps now is also a good time to start new, smaller, Sunday School/Small Groups.

## Sunday Children's Ministries

A big part of, and support to, morning worship in many churches is children's ministry. From the nursery to children's worship programs, social distancing becomes next to impossible with small children. What are churches to do? Some ideas:

- **Delay Re-Opening Children’s Ministry Facilities/Programs.** In this scenario, options for children’s programming are intentionally limited for the well-being of children and their teachers. If children attend worship services, they must stay with their families as the church enforces its social distancing policies.
- **Reopen with Caution and Limitations.** If church leaders decide to reopen part or all their children’s ministry, it is recommended that parents be instructed to remain home and NOT bring children to worship if anyone in the family has shown signs of illness. Additionally, implement a drop off/pick up program to protect children, as well as provide handwashing stations for children before, during, and after the children’s program. For more guidance on running safe childcare, check with the Center for Disease Control website.<sup>6</sup>

### Event Accommodation (Other Than Sunday)

“Church” is so much more than a Sunday morning or Wednesday night worship/prayer service. God designed His church to thrive on fellowship. Many churches prior to COVID-19 restrictions ran events on and off the church campus seven days a week. Church leaders need to consider how they will adjust these events considering COVID-19 and present restrictions.

- **Bible Study and Prayer Times.** Many churches began virtual Bible studies and prayer times to replace in-person meetings. As churches restart these events, it is important to consider how to accommodate the attendance of the most vulnerable in our congregations. When in-person Bible studies and prayer times restart, be sure to provide virtual connectivity for those who are not healthy enough to attend. Additionally, establish the requirement that anyone who would care to attend these events must be symptom-free 24 hours before the start of the event. Finally, it is recommended that churches follow the guidelines of local authorities for social distancing for businesses (separation rule, mask requirement, etc.).
- **Children and Youth Events.** From VBS to lock-ins, and concerts to youth camp, church leaders are making hard decisions about whether to hold or attend these events. Some churches have chosen to push events like VBS and youth camp back to mid or late July. To help with this decision making, remember this principle: ***the broader the reach or draw of your ministry, or an event your church wants to attend, the higher the likelihood of a person with infection attending the event.*** For churches that draw attendees from a small community, the less likely someone who is infected will attend a church event like VBS. However, if the youth camp your church attends draws hundreds or even thousands of kids from across multiple municipalities or states, the HIGHER the likelihood of infection being brought to the camp and spreading. To be clear, I am NOT saying cancel these events. I AM, however, saying that these

<sup>6</sup> For more guidance on child care programs that remain open, visit: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/guidance-for-childcare.html>.



kinds of events must be carefully weighed, and appropriate actions taken to protect attendees, so everyone has a safe opportunity to worship and grow in Christ.

- **Outside/Special Events (Weddings, Funerals, Etc.).** Many churches regularly host weddings, funerals, baby showers, etc. for members and outside guests. Church leaders need to triage these events and ask hard questions on whether these events are necessary, at least in the near term. Given the new cleaning and disinfecting programs, should churches ask those using the facilities to help pay for those services?

## Safety Considerations for Christian Organizations

I cannot say it enough: the impact of COVID-19 is not just changing the way we do business; it has already changed the way we do business. Not since 9/11 has one event impacted the thoughts, perspectives, and activities of so many people so quickly. Just as 9/11 permanently changed air travel, so too has COVID-19 changed the way we do business and work, from headquarters to field ministries. After 9/11, our personnel looked to authorities (both public and private sector) for security. After COVID-19, our personnel will look to organizational leaders to establish and maintain clean and sterile workspaces and ministry environments. We, as organizational leaders, have both a legal and moral duty of care to provide these safe environments and spaces.

As the world emerges from this pandemic, undoubtedly there will be new opportunities to share the Gospel, make disciples, and serve the Lord. In these new opportunities, however, the WORK of ministry will make fundamental shifts in how ministry is accomplished. These shifts must address physiological, emotional, and spiritual threats, concerns, and fears of the ministry workforce. These shifts will require thoughtfulness and planning on behalf of ministry leaders as we both encourage and empower ministry through the calling of our people.

Finally, Christian organizations must regularly checkup on, and ensure adherence to, local health policies and guidelines. I know of some municipalities that have redefined cleaning standards more than once a week with significant changes in policy and/or guidance. For guidance on cleaning and disinfecting organizational facilities, please visit the Center for Disease Control website.<sup>7</sup>

### Principles to Live By For Safe Working Environments: “C3” and “HAT”

With all the changes that have come to the world since COVID-19, some things do remain the same, like the use of acronyms. In this case, think C3 (Called, Clean, and Confident), and HAT (Healthy, Accommodating, and Technology). These two acronyms can help set Christian organizations on a good trajectory as they develop continuity in this new normal.

- **C3: Called, Clean, Confident**

**Called:** As mentioned in the *First Steps* Section of this document, the potential for attrition because of COVID-19 health concerns is real. As employees return to work, leaders should take time to address fears and concerns of employees and use this as an opportunity to reaffirm the callings of staff members and encourage personal obedience in consideration of the new normal. Personally, I have found comfort and challenge in Romans 8:26-39 and used these passages to encourage others in their calling in recent days. Organizations that host prayer and chapel times should consider challenging the called in the days to come.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>

**Clean:** As mentioned above, organizations must adopt rigorous cleaning procedures to protect both employees and those they serve. Reducing the risk of COVID-19 exposure by cleaning and disinfecting work areas DAILY will be critical. Developing and implementing hygiene policies (i.e.: hand washing policies, facemask policies, etc.) will send a strong message to employees that management cares for their safety.

**Confident:** Critical to an organization is building its employees' confidence that leaders have prioritized their safety. Employees who are confident in (employees who trust) the organization have a higher morale and commitment to the mission. Christian organizations need to establish and maintain that confidence through transparency in safety policies and procedures. From posting policies publicly to auditing health and safety practices for compliance, building confidence in employees is critical in the new normal.

- **HAT: Healthy, Accommodating, Technology**

**Healthy:** A healthy workplace is a productive workplace. It cannot be overstated the need for organizations to expect and understand the regulatory scrutiny that is being placed on organizations and businesses as they reopen. It really is a patchwork of guidance coming from federal, state, and local authorities. Avoiding legal issues from the government, as well as staff members, as part of a comprehensive legal and moral duty of care should be prioritized. This includes receiving wise legal and medical counsel as organizations consider exposure issues such as allowing those who have been virus free to return to work, as well as those who have had the virus and recovered.

Organizations should consider the feasibility and necessity of regular testing and screening of staff members for COVID-19; especially those who travel often domestically and internationally. Holding international meetings virtually rather than in person should be considered into the midterm. Likewise, organizations should also consider creating isolation rooms for employees who experience COVID-19 symptoms while at work. In the new normal, designated isolation rooms for illness may become as normative as a portable AED machines on the office wall.

Finally, organizations should consider not only physical health, but also mental health. Some Christian organizations provide in-person chaplaincy or "member care" resources to staff. For those who do not, providing Christian counseling options and resources may be appropriate, including virtual resources. Given the level of stress the new normal is already placing on some individuals, proactive mental health support is an essential part of a comprehensive duty of care.

**Accommodating:** In the wake of the COVID-19 epidemic, many Christian organizations adjusted schedules and moved to a work-from-home program. Reports from many leaders I have talked with have been quite positive when it

comes to working remotely. Some of these organizational leaders are discussing how to complete more work virtually in the future. That said, in the new normal, shared office space and office equipment may be waning given social distancing guidelines and the reality that shared space/equipment means shared germs. In some cases, shifting staff to permanent work from home may be realistic. For those still working in “traditional” shared workspaces, design layout changes could come quickly to accommodate less employees in the same shared space to enforce social distancing regulations.

Accommodations in travel scheduling and methodologies must be considered. Ministry, at its heart, is a personal endeavor. This means travel for Christian organizations will continue; especially those organizations involved with mission sending and humanitarian work. While travel must continue, it may well be highly modified for the foreseeable future. Risk-based decision making backed by SWOT analysis<sup>8</sup> may be the norm as organizations make decisions on travel. Travel changes locally include changes in commuting, car-pooling, and ride sharing (no more slugging?<sup>9</sup>). Domestic and international travel is certain to be impacted as most major airlines have shuttered travel routes and significantly restricted cabin seating. As of this writing, many countries in the world have closed their borders to stop the spread of COVID-19 and may not open for several more months, making international travel next to impossible.

**Technology:** Advances in business and communication technologies have allowed many ministries to function as normal in the last few months of quarantine and social distancing. Given the vulnerabilities of shared office spaces and equipment, now is the time to invest in new technologies that allow organizations to function optimally in the new normal with a permanent work-from-home staff. This investment requires capital, but the long-term payoff could well be downsizing office space and eliminating associated overhead.

A term for Christian organizations to learn is “digital nomad.” Digital nomads are a type of people who use telecommunications technologies to earn a living.<sup>10</sup> This kind of work is nothing new, but social distancing has made this kind of workforce more palatable to organization leaders. Of note, more self-funded international missionaries are funding their ministries as digital nomads. The success of their ministries hinges on providing top-quality work for secular companies as they manage their time to plant churches. Time will tell if these principles can be successfully applied to traditional brick and mortar organizations.

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<sup>8</sup> SWOT analysis analyzes the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats of organizations and their operations. For more on SWOT analysis, visit: <https://www.wordstream.com/blog/ws/2017/12/20/swot-analysis>.

<sup>9</sup> Slugging is a term used to describe a unique form of commuting found in the Washington, DC area, sometimes referred to as “Instant Carpooling” or “Casual Carpooling.” It is unique because people commuting into the city stop to pick up other passengers even though they are total strangers! For more on slugging, visit: <http://www.slug-lines.com/>.

<sup>10</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital\\_nomad](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_nomad)



## Conclusion

In conclusion, allow me to leave you with a thought from my first white paper sent to mission agency leaders that were just beginning to process their COVID-19 response.<sup>11</sup> Specifically, pandemics like COVID-19 are complex threats. During times of complex threats, decision making deeply rooted in wisdom is critical. So, when it comes to complex threats like COVID-19, we must stop thinking basic math and start thinking algebra.

Often, we try to solve equations based on  $A + B = C$ . Remember, God is not the author of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33), and we must be cautious of oversimplifying decision making during complex situations. Instead of  $A + B = C$ , we must move to a different equation:  $A + (B/X) = C$ . This equation requires us to solve for X. Let me explain:  $A + (B/X) = C$  can be defined as:

A = Our Highest Value (the Gospel)

B = Our Highest Priorities (personnel, programs and projects)

C = Our Highest Precedent (intended outcomes for mission and ministry success)

X = Disruptors (factors that impact or impair our Priorities)

In this equation we see that X is NECESSARY for mission success. That means when we solve for X, we must do so by balancing the equation based on our Values, Priorities, and Precedent. For example, if meeting needs resulting from a pandemic is a priority, then remaining active in a location, despite the X threat, will empower mission success.

With some ministries, meeting needs as the result of the X threat IS the mission (think Christian humanitarian and medical organizations). Therefore, the risk of infection from pandemic is counted in the equation as these organizations establish their priorities. However, if the highest priority is protecting the lives of team members (or parishioners) and their families in order to continue the mission after the threat passes, then isolation, relocation, or evacuation can be justified toward the long game of mission success. Thus, the X threat is accounted for by avoiding the X threat altogether.

But now, most organizations and churches can no longer avoid the X threat. Therefore, leaders of our churches and organizations must again rebalance the equation. There is nothing new under the sun, and examples of the Church over the centuries taking great risks to “rescue the perishing and care for the dying” are proudly recorded in church history. Perhaps now is our turn.

Think about it: In God’s sovereignty, the Lord accounts for the X factors. They do not catch Him by surprise. Moreover, God often uses the X factors to glorify Himself. Indeed, God may well be the author of the X factor. Remember, the Lord Himself sent the plagues upon Egypt in the book of Exodus. The Lord also says in Isaiah 45:7:

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<sup>11</sup> *Pandemic, Obedience, and the Challenge of Analysis*. Scott Brawner. Page 4.

*“I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity,  
I am the Lord, who does all these things.”<sup>12</sup>*

Christians must understand that God uses the X factors that often inhibit and impair our ministry priorities for His glory and the good of humanity. We must both understand that and USE that understanding as wisdom in our organization’s decision-making process.

Going forward, it is important to understand not only what threats or concerns the new normal provides us, but also what risks our churches and organizations are willing to accept toward Gospel obedience. Undoubtedly, times of great challenge force believers to choose whether they will hold the Gospel as their highest value or place other values and priorities before the call. Perhaps the new normal will help Christians reexamine Jesus’ call to daily deny themselves as they take up the cross and follow Him (Luke 9:23).

In my journeys, the Lord has taught me many things. One of the greatest axioms He has taught me is that the reward of personal (and corporate) obedience is only found on the other side of risk. If the Church is to make the most of the opportunities COVID-19 has granted us, then the leaders of our churches and Christian organizations must allow a desire for risk and obedience to permeate their church’s and organization’s culture, values, and ethos. Ultimately, despite the risks of infection, the Church MUST keep the Gospel as the highest value. It is my prayer that leadership in the Church will personally accept that call to risk and obedience.

Brothers and sisters, solve for X.

In Christ,  
Scott Brawner

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<sup>12</sup> The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

## Useful Resources

*Prepare For A 'New Normal' As Lockdown Restrictions Ease.* World Health Organization.

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/13-april-who-briefing-coronavirus-covid19-lockdown-restrictions-guidance/>

*Christianity Has Been Handling Epidemics for 2000 Years.* Foreign Policy.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/13/christianity-epidemics-2000-years-should-i-still-go-to-church-coronavirus/>

*Will the Church Financially Survive the COVID-19 Pandemic?* Faith and Leadership.

<https://faithandleadership.com/will-church-financially-survive-covid-19-pandemic>

*Reopening the Church: A Discussion on Leading After COVID-19.* Vanderbloemen.

<https://www.vanderbloemen.com/blog/reopening-the-church-after-covid19>

*COVID-19 is a Chance for U.S. Churches to Learn from the Church in China.* The China Partnership.

<https://www.chinapartnership.org/blog/2020/3/covid-19-is-a-chance-for-us-churches-to-learn-from-the-church-in-china>

*List N: Disinfectants for Use Against SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19).*

US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

<https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2>

*Reopening Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfecting Public Spaces, Workplaces, Businesses, Schools, and Homes.* US Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/reopen-guidance.html>

*Taking Inspiration and Gratitude From the Early Christians in Pandemic Rome.*

Relevant Magazine.

<https://relevantmagazine.com/god/taking-inspiration-and-gratitude-from-the-early-christians-in-pandemic-rome-n/>

*The Spirit of VBS In the Year of the Pandemic.* Group.

<https://www.group.com/category/ministry-resources/childrens-ministry/vbs/vbs-and-covid-19.do>

*Normal Again, Thanks to COVID-19.* The Gospel Coalition

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/normal-again-covid-19/>

*Coronavirus Resources for You and Your Church.* Lifeway.

<https://www.lifeway.com/en/special-emphasis/coronavirus-resources>

## About the Author

Scott Brawner is President of Concilium and the Executive Director of the Risk Management Network. He is an expert in the field of safety, security, and crisis management for Christian missionary and humanitarian organizations. Scott is one of the most widely traveled and experienced leaders in his field with work and ministry in more than 110 countries around the world.



Scott accepted Jesus as his personal Savior in January of 1987 and served in the United States Army with the First Ranger Battalion in Operation Desert Storm.

Scott was called to Gospel ministry in 1992 and is a licensed and ordained minister.

Scott holds a BA degree in History and a MA in Christian Education. Scott has worked in mission sending and security endeavors for more than 20 years, including founding and leading the Fusion ministry now operated by the International Mission Board and Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Scott served for seven years as Director of Risk Management for the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention (IMB). During that time, Brawner partnered with security directors from multiple US mission agencies and NGOs to create the Risk Management Network (RMN), an interactive network of Evangelical security and risk management professionals. The RMN includes security professionals serving evangelical organizations and churches representing more than 100,000 missionaries and NGO personnel globally. Brawner has coordinated this network since its inception.

In 2010, in collaboration with the US State Department Bureau of Diplomatic Security's Overseas Security and Advisory Council (OSAC), Brawner and other faith-based security leaders in the private sector created a Faith-Based Working Group. Scott served as co-chairman of this group and continues to champion the needs of faith-based organizations throughout the US Government.

In 2013, Brawner was asked by the US Secretary of State to join the prestigious OSAC Council. The Council is comprised of only 34 private sector and public sector member organizations that represent specific industries or agencies operating abroad to provide direction and guidance to develop programs that most benefit the U.S. private sector overseas. Scott now serves the Council in a Senior Advisor role.

Professional affiliations include Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC), Risk Management Network, American Legion, US Army Ranger Association, NGO Security Network, and the International NGO Safety and Security Association (INSSA).

Scott lives in the United States with his wife and three children.