



# COVID-19 and Church Planning: Three Considerations

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Generis is a team of experienced and passionate guides inspired by partnering with churches to fund their God-sized vision.

Generis helps churches rethink reality to make new things possible and define clear expectations. We connect the church's unique vision to proven strategies that have helped fund more than six-billion dollars in the faith community with a make-it-last mindset. What we accomplish together will outlive the length of any single campaign, project, or initiative.

This unique COVID-19 season has had a global impact and put the church in a lot of unexpected situations. Recognizing that the effects of this pandemic aren't going away quickly, we're helping churches plan for the next season.

In the first stage of the pandemic, we saw congregations entering into a great improvisation, scrambling to take control of a situation most never saw coming. How could churches quickly marshal resources to sustain ministry via electronic means? The second stage has been focused on regathering: How will we bring our congregations back in face-to-face settings without risking their health? Will it be a great reunion or will we have lost many members? Some have begun the process of coming back slowly. A few started and stopped. Others have plans to regather with accompanying protocols that may require updates.

Even if their plans are clear, this is a long game with extra innings possible even months from now.

## **FORWARD FOCUS**

To give some context for where we are, let me explain that church leaders have been hit hard in three ways:

1. They've been hit by COVID-19 itself, including related health concerns, public health guidance, and scrambling to carry ministry forward.
2. They're facing the companion recessionary impact with massive job losses in some communities. While some of those jobs will come back online, it is estimated that 25 percent will not. In addition, larger companies are now forecasting further job losses in the fall.



3. The increased visibility of racial injustices have propelled conversations about the impact of race to the forefront of cultural conversations.

Exacerbating the above is how polarizing these factors have become. Many pastors have been trying to address these three issues productively but have been caught in the crossfire of leaders who can't agree. This has disheartened many pastors. Some, now facing both uncertainty and disagreement, have turned to just hoping that "fall will be back to normal."

### **That dream is quickly fading.**

Presuming we'll be back to "normal" by fall is unrealistic at this point, and we are called to be wise. Church leaders need to be prepared for at least a year of continued disruption and change, whether the pandemic lasts that long or not. For this reason, we're advising our clients that now is a really good time for a productive, forward focus.

Here's what that means: This is a season that is forcing us to rethink, reframe, and eventually relaunch our congregation's ministries with an eye toward the future. Looking to the future is the most productive way to address the issues churches are facing right now.

Our framework is simple. Your congregational leadership team needs a multiple-option scenario plan that helps you have some sense of "if this happens, we will do this; and if that happens, we will do that." Right now, many congregational teams are living in the stress of making things up week-by-week. To emerge from that stress, we need to put up a few markers and stakes for the new road out of 2020.

That involves creating multiple plans—one for fall 2020, one for winter 2021, spring 2021, summer 2021, and then beyond. Here are three components those plans should include:

- 1. Focus ministry and format:** For each of these seasons, what will be your focused ministries, and how will you deliver them? Which ministry initiatives will get 80 percent of your time, energy, emphasis, volunteers, and staff resources? For example, without a vaccine, many will still need to be addressed through electronic pathways. Who is guiding your digital efforts?

What ministries must be paused, delayed, or ended, so you can focus on your digital efforts? Which active ministries may have to wait a few seasons before they relaunch?

Each calendar season may look different, so it's best to lay down some plans now, a flexible framework for how to respond to the most pressing needs while putting others on hold.

- 2. Flexible staffing:** For your most important ministries, who will lead, guide, recruit, and develop volunteers and others to lead those ministries?



Some of your key volunteers may be in vulnerable populations, may have lost jobs or be suffering some other loss that renders them unable to serve. Who will comfort those suffering loss, and who will pick up the task of encouraging and enlisting new volunteers in the meantime?

By the way—when looking for new volunteers, don't just think about filling existing roles. Consider skill sets and abilities you may have once thought your church didn't really need. Does your church now need help rethinking its budget? Invite in some of your financial leaders. Do you need help with social media or your technology? Look for volunteers with specific tech or marketing skills.

Now that government loan money is expiring, some of our clients have begun the painful process of furloughs, layoffs, and job elimination. Once your team has identified the focus ministry areas, then it can more easily forecast some of the staffing needs to help drive those ministries. For some, that will mean furloughing some paid staff and volunteers until a certain ministry comes back for its purpose. Other staff and volunteers may be quite flexible and able to be repositioned into current focused ministry initiatives where possible.

- 3. Firm finances:** At the time of my first article, written right as the crisis was upon us, the payroll protection loans had not yet been initiated. Many congregations used these loans to stabilize their financial position. In addition, some of our clients had good reserves and a great understanding of their generosity analytics. They made special calls to their best givers to get a sense of the future.

Many at NCF have helped their own congregations (and even other less-well-supported congregations) with special gifts during this season. However, it's August now, and we're getting reports of the typical summer slump in giving. My personal advice to clients is to have two budgets for September through December 2020—one budget at expected income projections now, and one with a 25-percent reduction from September to December.

If your team has already done this, how does it change how you think about the other two components? This is why you need a multi-option scenario plan, to plan for how you can best adapt to all the changes coming at you.

If you're holding out for the impacts of the virus to clear before you start planning, or if you try to restart all your ministries at once, you'll lessen your impact over the next year. Don't wait until you're in a bind financially or your ministries are waning to make backup plans.

Get help confirming your financial plans, and begin a process of constructing your ministry plan for the next year to 18 months. My personal view is that, if churches take the time to rethink, reframe, and relaunch in a focused way, they will be healthier and more productive than ever. God has a way of working all things for the good.

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Generis takes biblical principles, best giving practices, and ministry DNA and collaborates with churches to weave them together into a strategy that helps fund God-inspired vision.

Generis has some free resources to help your church start some of this process on their site. Start with [Beyond: The Forward Focus Framework](#).

