



PHASING INTO **NEW NORMAL**

A PRACTICAL RESOURCE TO HELP
RMMN CHURCHES TRANSITION INTO A
POST-CORONA “NEW NORMAL”

BY GENE RONCONE

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The coronavirus pandemic has and will continue to change the landscape of modern life. In many ways, our lives and ministries will never be the same. Now is not a time to coast or “wing it.” Ministry in a post-corona world will require discernment and intentionality. Like Israel in the wake of a national crisis, we will need men and women like the sons of Issachar “who understood the times and knew what Israel should do” (1 Chronicles 12:32 NIV).

The COVID-19 “shelter in place” or “stay-at-home order” did not happen all at once. It was the result of nearly a month of escalating actions. The purpose of phased mitigation was to give our communities time to adjust within the parameters of their emotional and practical capacities. Returning to a “new normal” will require the same kind of phased intentionality. Wise leaders will know we cannot in one moment switch to “full-throttle” normal. Not only will we need to identify what our “new normal” is but also to phase into it slowly, discerningly, and intentionally.

That is why this planning resource was created for our RMMN churches. Knowing it is always easier to make something better than to create it, I have drafted this four-phased template with the input of some very gifted friends whose names are listed in the footnotes.¹ I believe it can help you and your church wade into the waters of post-corona ministry.

Use it, improve it, or cut and paste it to suit the needs of your unique context. At the very least, reading over it with your team will help you stay out in front of this crisis and bring focus to your re-entry into a moving target I have called our “new normal.”

One last encouragement. It is easy to become overwhelmed with feelings of inadequacy during a crisis like this. There is so much to do, so much to learn, and so many uncertainties. Remember, however, that you are a Spirit-filled, God-called child of an Eternal King. No amount of human planning or strategy is an adequate substitute for God’s leading, miraculous provision, and faith. The enemy wants you to think the future is dependent upon you, but it is not and never was. The only expert on this new era of ministry is God Almighty. Aren’t you glad He is on our side!

Contending for community,

Gene Roncone
Rocky Mountain Ministry Network
District Superintendent/Network Pastor (aka “Helper”)

The Rationale for a Phased Return

There are several reasons why each church must invest time in thinking through a phased return to a "new normal."

- 1. Diversity of need.** Your church's population will have very different needs. For medical reasons, vulnerable populations will still not be able to return to normal as quickly as others. Some will require more time to adjust to anxiety, grief, and stress. Others will be overwhelmed with the convergence of second-wave ramifications arising from the crisis. For example, it would not be unreasonable to expect that some form of online services may need to be continued several weeks to months after stay-at-home orders are lifted for the high-risk population.
- 2. Social distancing.** Social distancing standards will not be turned off like a light switch. In some cases, they will fade out in ways similar to how they phased into existence. In other areas, they may even be strengthened or prolonged depending on the emergence of new "hot spots."
- 3. Hurting people.** This crisis will require the church to extend new ministries to the sick, grieving, unemployed, and vulnerable in our cities. Our old normal may not have provided enough margin for the new ministries our future will demand. Failing to plan will result in irrelevance.
- 4. New normal.** This crisis has changed us forever. It has forced us to be more creative, innovative, and adaptive. It has helped us identify more authentic ways to exist as well as given us a great appreciation for things we once took for granted as a community of faith. Our new normal will be different than our old normal. A phased return will help you abandon irrelevant practices while embracing new ones.
- 5. Limited margin.** We all have different levels of resiliency and emotional capacity. Business owners in your church will most likely have neglected their personal lives and households during the crisis. Employees who will be returning to work will be catching up and have less time to volunteer and support church events. Everyone will need margin. Helping your church members slowly wade into the waters of a new normal will not only assist them but also position your church for a quick recovery and the return of ministry momentum.

Reentry will require us to successfully navigate the following four phases:

- Phase 1:** Learning and leaning into the future
- Phase 2:** Relaunching core ministries
- Phase 3:** Meeting congregational and community needs
- Phase 4:** Embracing our "new normal"

Four Phases of Reentry

Knowing it is always easier to make something better than to create it, following is a four-phased plan to wade into the waters of post-corona ministry. Use it, improve it, or cut and paste it to suit the needs of your own unique context.

PHASE 1: LEARNING AND LEANING INTO THE FUTURE. Phase 1 consists of learning and leaning into the future.

- 1. Prayer initiatives.** Mobilize your people in prayer for God's miraculous intervention and for those affected by the virus in your church and community.
- 2. Self-care evaluation.** Pastors cannot maintain the fast pace, emotional engagement, continuous innovativeness, and instant availability that the crisis initially demanded. What spiritual disciplines need to be strengthened and what boundaries need to be determined and set as well as what expectations are both reasonable and sustainable? See <https://coronavirusandthechurch.com/resiliency>.
- 3. Lessons learned.** Prioritize the five most important lessons you learned about the state of your church during the crisis. This list will be the foundation for strategic investment in post COVID-19.
- 4. Grief care.** Be prepared to offer memorial services and grief care for those in your community and church who lost loved ones during this crisis. Most of the deceased will have been cremated, and mortuaries and funeral homes may not be able to accommodate the need for memorial services. Some states are already asking pastors to officiate at "virtual memorial services" via Zoom and other platforms. Recruiting a team of counselors or therapists in your church to assist with counseling and designating two specific days of the week for hosting memorial services may help your church staff and volunteers stay on top of things.
- 5. Recommend Christian counselors.** Remember, most all counselors do virtual or online counseling these days. That means people in any setting from rural to metro have access to counselors from the privacy of their home computer. If a member of your church does not have internet service, you can make a workstation at the church available to them to receive counseling there over the internet. Focus on the Family has one of the best online referral systems for Christian counseling. All you have to do is plug in your area code and then select how many miles radius you are willing to travel if you want in-person counseling, or you can set up an online appointment with those who provide personal and private counseling online. You can also find a specific counselor to fit your unique need (alcohol, depression, grief, etc.). This information can be accessed at: <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/get-help/counseling-services-and-referrals/>.
- 6. Staff/leadership portfolios.** Does rebounding from this crisis require adjustments to existing staff/leadership/volunteer portfolios? A few pastors may be forced into temporary bivocational ministry. If so, put the what, how, and when on paper. It is hard to solve problems that are yet to be articulated.

- 7. Anticipate concerns.** Get on a Zoom call with your key volunteers or leadership community and brainstorm together to come up with a list of the various kinds of concerns your people may have about returning to small groups and eventually to larger worship services. This may be a good time to launch the congregational survey mentioned in Phase 2 as it will give you some early indicators.
- 8. Safety standards.** Determine a plan to provide a safe ministry experience for those who can attend. After researching different avenues to obtain protective products (face masks, hand sanitizers, touchless temperature thermometers, etc.) for our churches, we have found that Amazon is the best resource. Amazon is still receiving and filling orders for these products. HOWEVER, there is a longer waiting period to receive them as their priority is to health care and government establishments. In preparing for the near future, we highly suggest placing an order NOW to ensure you have the proper protective products when state and federal governments lighten or lift bans for us to meet again for corporate worship and/or small groups. A few recommended sanitization practices are listed at this site: <https://covid19.colorado.gov/schools-workplaces-community>.

PHASE 2: RELAUNCHING CORE MINISTRIES. Phase 2 consists of gradually relaunching core ministries as meeting restrictions are lifted.

- 1. Prayer initiatives.** Continue to mobilize your people to pray for specific needs in your church and for its congregants.
- 2. Self-care evaluation.** As a leader, what spiritual disciplines in your life need to be strengthened, what boundaries need to be determined, and what expectations are reasonable and sustainable? See <https://coronavirusandthechurch.com/resiliency>.
- 3. Assess congregational needs.** Use an online survey to monitor the congregation and to identify those who need help and those able to help, especially in the area of people finding work. This can be used once or every few weeks if needed. If you presently have a paid account at www.surveymonkey.com, the Network has already hired a statistician to create a generic survey template that can be shared to your account and customized for your own church.
 - A short video explaining how it works can be viewed at <https://youtu.be/DB5HBsnD2S4>
 - More information on how to access the template on your own account can be found in the Helpful Resources section of this document.
 - In the meantime, you can check out the sample of this survey at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/churchcheckin>.
- 4. Management policy.** Adjust to and set criteria for the return of administrative scenarios like return to work, staff meetings, board meetings, and other such meetings.
- 5. Gradual lifting of bans.** Federal and state governments will gradually increase the maximum number of participants allowed in group events. It would be wise for you to think through those stages now and what ministries will be impacted and how. Writing out a brief paragraph explaining what ministries will be affected and how now will enable you to respond quickly later.

- 6. Small group relaunch.** A schedule should be determined outlining the date, frequency, and safety standards for the relaunching of small groups that meet in the church or in homes which will not exceed numerical meeting standards.
- 7. Flexible adaptations.** Meeting restrictions will most likely gradually change and even be inconsistent in ways similar to how they were implemented. Restrictions may even expand and contract depending on the containment of the virus. Be prepared to be flexible in the following areas:
- Greeters and Guest Service teams may need to be restructured to accommodate social distancing when the “phase in” to public worship begins.
 - Congregational “greeting times” (shaking hands, hugs, and meet and greets) may need to be adapted to accommodate health standards.
 - How communion and prayer for the sick are provided will need to be addressed.
 - Sanctuaries may need to remove 50 percent of the chair capacity to meet social distancing guidelines or have family groups sit together in clusters of about ten.
 - Others may have to watch the service in a classroom in another part of the facility just to get more people in the services.
 - Nursery and children’s ministries will likely be limited to a certain number of kids per classroom (to reflect the state guidelines) and need to be thought through to fit your context.
 - Church coffee shops may need to remain closed even after the “phase in” to meet more stringent “food service guidelines.”
 - You may even need to add more services to spread people out.
 - If your church has a private school or before and aftercare for children, you may have to reduce enrollment to meet state guidelines.

The key is thinking through more than one possible solution now so you at least have a plan.

- 8. Sustaining online presence.** Dates and strategy should be determined to maintaining and sustaining online services and distance spiritual care for vulnerable populations. It would also be wise to find ways for your people to connect with your new virtual community watching online.
- 9. Message modification.** The new normal will be different and require different methods. However, the message (the gospel) is still the same. What new delivery methods will the new normal require in your context to continue delivering the same gospel in different ways?

PHASE 3: MEETING CONGREGATIONAL AND COMMUNITY NEEDS. Phase 3 consists of identifying and meeting both congregational and community needs.

- 1. Prayer initiatives.** Continue to mobilize your people in prayer regarding the many impact points this virus will have upon your community. These will include:
- People who have lost jobs
 - People who tested positive
 - Business owners you know
 - Your church’s outreach in the community
 - Those most vulnerable to the virus

- Governmental leaders (including the President and governor)
- Health care professionals
- Scientists, researchers, and the vaccine
- Those financially impacted
- Those mourning the loss of loved ones
- Churches to be ready to minister
- Pastors as they lead
- The hurting, homeless, and hopeless
- The unsaved to come to Christ

2. Self-care evaluation. Leading in crises requires you to write emotional, physical, and spiritual checks every day. Are you making spiritual deposits into your soul that can cover the leadership checks you are writing? How is your daily time in the Word going? What needs to change to get it back on track? See <https://coronavirusandthechurch.com/resiliency>.

3. Relaunching core services. Relaunching large groups and worship services with some social distancing (perhaps a person every two seats) will vary depending on your church size and has the potential to affect children and youth services as well.

4. Monitor congregational needs. Appoint a team member to monitor the needs of the congregational survey, summarize results, and keep the lead pastor and staff informed. They will trickle in and can be re-emphasized again over time if needed.

5. Community assessment. Contact several community leaders and request a short interview by phone to determine what your city, town, or community needs. This can include a combination of the mayor, city manager, various city council members, fire and police chiefs or command staff school principals, city departments of neighborhood services, county commissioner, nonprofit leaders, and social services. Some questions that can be asked include:

- What are the most pressing spiritual, personal, and social needs people have in our town/city/neighborhood?
- What are the five (5) greatest needs our city/neighborhood is facing right now?
- What needs does the city feel unqualified or unable to meet?
- What gaps need to be filled in this area that only a faith-based work can do?
- What vulnerable population in our community is underserved and how?
- Who in our town/city is effectively meeting COVID-19 needs?
- What local resources are available to help our citizens that we can share with our congregation and community?

Then evaluate how your church may be strategically aligned to help in these areas as well as other areas you will need to jump in and get "on-the-job training."

6. Financial empowerment. Resource those facing negative economic ramifications (job loss, position reduction, or transfer). This may involve:

- Creating an online job needed and available for your Facebook group or page on your church website.
- Résumé center where people in your church can get an idea of the qualifications of those needing work in order to better recommend them to others.
- Create an employment need prayer list.
- Use the online survey the Network created as a way to monitor the employment needs of your congregation.

- Send a weekly email of encouragement from the pastoral staff to those needing work.
- Create a system to provide letters of recommendation from influential people in your church.

If you do not have a benevolence policy, you will need a simple one to help you better steward your limited resources. A sample can be found in the Helpful Resources section of this document.

7. Identify high potential volunteers. Some of your congregants will turn inward and need to be ministered to. Others will be challenged and eager to reach out to others. Encourage those who are ready and willing to minister to others to take the SHAPE online inventory to identify areas where they are spiritually and naturally gifted to serve. A list of a few of these online inventories can be accessed in the Helpful Resources section of this document. A short weekly “Zoom” town hall meeting with a Q&A may help educate your people on the needs in your immediate community.

8. Dispatch ministry teams. Dispatch able and willing congregants to serve your town/city or other organizations in:

- Serving the sick.
- Weathering financial need and uncertainty.
- Launching virtual small groups.
- Loving and serving their community well.

9. Community collaboration. Initiate contact and work with other churches and cooperative agencies in your city/town to help people recover.

10. Rework budget. Revisit your church budget to make sure it can finance the needs and realities of the “new normal.” Some items will need to be eliminated, reallocated, or added in light of COVID-19. Following are a few questions that may help you begin that process:

- What are the basic necessities to operate our current facilities and pay staff?
- What new streams of revenue should we explore?
- How much of our cash reserves did we burn through?
- Do we have an understanding of significant tithers or givers that have lost their jobs? Does that reflect our budget? How are we going to build something into the budget to care for these in need?
- How can we get 2-3 months of emergency funds saved to operate in the event of another outbreak or emergency?
- Am I prepared with a solid, reasonably priced online giving company?
- What ministry areas are producing and need more funding?
- What was stopped during the pandemic and does not need to restart?
- What areas are receiving funding but are not producing?
- What do we find to be not as valuable after COVID-19? Does it need to continue?
- What new ministry outlets do we want to continue?
- If our budget is solid, how can we support or care for newer or struggling churches?
- Are we funding anything that does not align with the vision to move forward?
- How are we thanking those who are generous?

It will also be important to maintain your pledges to your missionary partners and consider applying to the Federal Government’s SBA loan program associated with the coronavirus.

PHASE 4: EMBRACING THE “NEW NORMAL.” Phase 4 consists of strategic planning for relevant ministry in the season of the “new normal.”

- 1. Prayer initiatives.** Continue to mobilize your people in prayer for those who continue to be negatively affected by the spread of the virus in other parts of the world.
- 2. Self-care evaluation.** On a scale of 1-5, how is your personal walk with God in this phase? What would need to change to make it a 5? See <https://coronavirusandthechurch.com/resiliency>.
- 3. Ministry assessment.** Remember, you do not have the time or resources to recreate or relaunch your entire church, but you cannot do ministry as normal either. Find balance by creating a comprehensive list of all the active and paused ministries of your church. Evaluate each ministry on your list by using the following evaluative questions:
 - How does this ministry empower the people of the church to join Jesus on His mission to seek and save that which is lost?
 - What are some compelling reasons for this ministry to continue or be resumed once face-to-face meetings are possible?
 - What new ministry methods or delivery systems are we using now that need to be continued when face-to-face meetings are resumed?
 - How will our face-to-face gatherings be different because of what we have learned during the crisis?
 - What ministries need to be permanently discontinued because they are no longer missionally effective?
 - What needs exist in our community that God is calling us to do something about?
 - How will God provide the resources for us to step out to meet community needs?
 - Who are the overlooked, underserved, and forgotten people in our community and how will we help them know Jesus?
- 4. Sustained online ministry.** Many churches have resisted the migration into the virtual world, but the coronavirus has taken many congregations into a quick immersion into the digital age. The initial move into the digital world was to accommodate online giving and worship services in light of stay-at-home orders, but the coronavirus is just the tipping point of much more to come. Indeed, this change may be the most profound of all the changes churches will face after the coronavirus is no longer considered pandemic. How and to what extent will you continue an online ministry presence?
- 5. Plan for the 2020 holiday season.** Determine what holiday events would be meaningful in light of a post-coronavirus year and begin planning those events (Thanksgiving service, Christmas services, and New Year’s celebration).
- 6. 2021 Calendar.** Brainstorm with your team and determine your 2021 annual calendar.
- 7. 2021 Budget.** Determine a 2021 budget that facilitates your mission, objectives, and post-corona needs. Be sure to maintain your pledges to your missionary partners. See the questions above in “Phase 3, Rework Budget” to help address this issue.

Helpful Resources

Following are some resources you may find helpful in getting started:

1. **Congregational COVID-19 Survey Template.** The RMMN Network has created a congregational COVID-19 survey template. If you would like a free copy of the Survey Monkey congregational survey that was created for RMMN churches, you can find out more at this link: www.rmdc.org/Survey_Access_Instructions.pdf.
2. **Opening Up America Again**, three-phased government guidelines, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica>
3. **24 Questions Your Church Should Answer Before People Return** by Ken Braddy. <https://kenbraddy.com/2020/04/18/20>
4. **Ed Stetzer.** Zoom call with Ed Stetzer about pivoting to a post-corona ministry context at https://zoom.us/rec/share/5MB6LZfNzUllZqvD2BHRZa0fTqPEaa8gCdL-Pdemkyypt3P_RKkhREOYOynlqc. Use password: H9*+71uP
5. **Made to Flourish.** Made to Flourish empowers pastors and their churches to integrate faith, work, and economic wisdom for the flourishing of their communities: www.madetoflourish.org.
6. **Benevolence policy.** Samples of two benevolence policies are at www.rmdc.org/BenevolencPolicy.pdf and www.rmdc.org/BenevolencPolicy2.pdf.
7. **Ed Stetzer's COVID-19 website:** Trusted Resources for Churches from Leading Experts <https://coronavirusandthechurch.com>.
8. **SHAPE Inventory Resources.** The SHAPE assessment is an online inventory that helps believers identify their spiritual gifts, heart and passion, natural abilities, personality, and past experiences that can be mobilized for ministry. Different versions of this inventory can be accessed at www.rmdc.org/SHAPE_Resources.pdf.
9. **Pastor Resiliency Resources.** Soul care resources for ministers can be found at <https://coronavirusandthechurch.com/resiliency>.

¹ This document was created by Gene Roncone in consultation with the following colleagues and collaborators:

- Stephanie Farmer, Associate Director of Administration and Finance, University of Colorado Cancer Center, University of Colorado School of Medicine
- Charlie Self, Director of Learning Communities, Made to Flourish
- Ed Stetzer, Executive Director, Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College
- Everod Samuel, CEO and President, Samuel Engineering
- Caleb McNaughton, Lead Pastor, Highpoint Church, Aurora, Colorado
- Allison Blevins, LIFE Group Director, Church at Briargate, Colorado Springs, Colorado
- Rhonda Roncone, Rocky Mountain Ministry Network, Colorado Springs, Colorado
- Dane Wead, Lead Pastor, New Life Fellowship, Logan, Utah
- Paul Aragon, Lead Pastor, Restoration Church, Fountain, Colorado
- Bill Woods, Lead Pastor, Solid Rock Christian Fellowship, Florence, Colorado
- Steve Pike, CEO, Urban Islands, Denver Colorado
- Joe Berry, Lead Pastor, Bethel Assembly of God, Burlington, Colorado
- George Negrete, Executive Administrator, Bethel Church, San Jose, California
- Allison DeHorn, Statistician, South Lyon, Michigan