

Questions to Address Before Resuming On-Site Faith Formation Programming

Adapted from a resource created by members of the Discipleship Ministry Team, May 2020 of the Southern New England Conference, United Church of Christ

Some of your congregation's most treasured traditions are rapidly approaching — Confirmation Sunday, celebrating graduating high school seniors, Vacation Bible School, mission trips. But will you be able to be together at your church building to celebrate and participate in them this year? Church leaders are asking serious questions as they face difficult decisions, feeling the tugging of their heart strings juxtaposed with needing to keep their congregants safe.

What follows are some questions to guide church faith formation leaders, youth leaders, and pastors in making the best possible decisions regarding upcoming programming with children, youth, and families.

First, define the “why” behind your faith formation event/program

- Why is it important to have this on-site church event? What is the desired outcome?
- What parts of this event are essential?
- Who are the essential participants for ensuring its success?

Then consider possible alternatives to maintain the safety of all

- Should this event be postponed, or go on hiatus, or be cancelled?
- What are some safe alternatives or adaptations to the on-site event?
- Can the event be re-imagined and shared via video (recorded or shared live)?
- Do church staff members have the time and necessary skills to implement safe accommodations and practices?
- If the event is held on-site, who will be at risk, and can that risk be effectively mitigated?

If you are leaning toward holding the event/program on-site

- How will you accommodate those who choose not to participate in person?
- How will you ensure that all children and youth adhere to appropriate physical distancing?
- How will you ensure that each child and teen engages in safe and sanitary practices?
- Will additional adult volunteers be necessary to ensure safe physical distancing and sanitizing practices?
- Will you have access to enough disinfectant supplies, masks, hand-washing areas, etc.?
- What about toileting with your littlest children? (Contact a local child care facility or your state department of public health to determine what safety practices are required.)
- Will you be able to maintain your current safety practices (at least two unrelated adults in each room with children/teens, for example)?
- Can you safely accommodate children with special needs?
- If your formation leaders are age 60 or older or have underlying health conditions, how will you deal with their desire to serve, or not to serve?
- What backup plans do you have if your faith formation leaders become ill or cannot fulfill their duties?

Finally, prayerfully weigh the pros and cons of holding the program/event on-site

- Does the event/program need to be either virtual or on-site?
- Would some parts of the event work well on-site while also being recorded and shared?

If you decide to re-imagine the event/program virtually, envision how it might work in your specific context

- How can your children, youth, and parents/caregivers stay connected to each other in new and safe ways?

- If many of your families live near other church families, how can you help them to remain safely connected with each other and with God?
- How might you re-imagine your connection with teens?
- What digital safety measures <https://www.sneucc.org/tips-for-faith-formation-and-youth-leaders> and copyright permissions <https://www.insuranceboard.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Copyright-IB-Flyer.pdf> will be needed to implement a virtual event?

Questions for specific events/programs

Vacation Bible School (VBS) Alternatives

- Does VBS need to be held during your traditional days and times?
- Are there ways to offer your programming at church? (parking lot, front steps, or church yard while keeping physical distance)
- Which VBS activities can be adapted for families to participate in at home that can then be shared together via social media?

Mission Trips

- How might you take your trip “virtually”? Watch a video? Are there other ways that the teens can reach out to or on behalf of those they were planning to serve?
- What are the needs in your own community?
- How might “old” technology work for you now? (Consider phone calls, greeting cards & letters, “caroling” door-to-door, drive-ins, etc.)

Milestones

- What traditions and rituals does your congregation offer to your high school seniors, confirmands, etc.
- How can you make meaning without being together? What tools and resources are available to you for creating meaningful celebrations and experiences while physically distanced?

As you consider the future

- How well was your former on-site programming working before the pandemic? Who do you reach now that you did not reach before? (and vice versa?) How will this impact what you do regarding on-site (and online) ministry in the future?
- How effective is faith formation at home with parents/caregivers in contrast to being at church with volunteers?
- Will your teens want to continue to meet more regularly now that they’ve been strengthening their bonds virtually? Will they want to continue meeting virtually (as well as on-site)?
- What will you now do with the online-only attendees? (worship, Sunday School, youth group, small groups)

How will you be faithful to your congregants while keeping them as safe as possible?