

The Guide to the Parish Welcome Back Plan

Before you begin...

This document and the entire Welcome Back Plan were written with your clergy, staff and volunteers in mind. Please read, discuss and adapt to your own local circumstances as necessary, keeping in mind the directives of your bishop and state department of health. If you have any questions, please drop me a line at nic@prengersolutions.com.

The post-pandemic mindset

Back in March 2020, we were already looking forward to things “returning to normal.” As the summer progressed, we started thinking about the so-called “new normal.” Now we are just ready to take our masks off for a while. Time goes on, and we realize things aren’t going back to exactly the way they were. What does this mean for pastors, staff and parish leaders?

It means that parish life will look much different than it did in the opening months of 2020, and that’s okay. This is both a great challenge and a great opportunity.

Thinking about our current circumstances and what the future may hold seems to cause great anxiety in about half our Church leaders, while the other half feel great joy. When life is disrupted, we have a golden opportunity to rethink how we are approaching ministry and parish administration. Old methods that weren’t really working anyway will fall by the wayside. New strategies and tools will take hold. But the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ will remain the same. In the long-term, the Catholic Church in the United States is going to be *better* for the pandemic. Coronavirus simply sped up a process we were already dealing with — the transition from a Christendom-minded stance of maintenance to an apostolic mindset of missionary activity.

Ten key assumptions

In creating the “Parish Welcome Back Plan,” our team first sketched out ten assumptions about parish life for 2021 and beyond. Keep these in mind as you plan your own reopening:

1. *People won’t come back on their own:* After a year or more of dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass and Holy Days of Obligation, there is no magic button we can push that will cause families to instantly return to in-person Mass attendance. Without frequent warm, sincere invitations to return, parishes will see Mass attendance remain flat at pandemic levels. It takes strong communication and sincere invitations to drive action. That’s why our plan is jam packed with letters, postcards and every other template imaginable so you can invite, invite, invite.

As during the first year of the pandemic, if you feel you’re doing too much or that

you're over-communicating, the truth is you're probably doing *just enough to break through the noise of daily life and reach your parishioners*.

2. *You probably can't do this on your own:* Remember those opening weeks of the pandemic? (None of us do. We were too busy!) This time of reopening is going to feel a little like that. There are new tools to use, new skills to learn and a lot of work to be done. Now is the time to rally parish leaders and volunteers and ask them for help. If you do as much work between now and December 2021 as you did in 2020, you will have done this right. Anything less and you'll experience the regret of not having done enough. For the parish to thrive, it must come roaring back in a timely manner. So, let your volunteers know that you will need some serious help in the next several months, and ask the Holy Spirit for the strength and inspiration to make this happen. Note especially that the formation of a "Welcome Back Committee" and a "Back to Mass" parishioner survey will help guide your decision-making.
3. *This is not about "moving on" quickly:* In the rush to reopen the parish, it may be tempting to simply restart all the old ministries and pretend like the pandemic never happened. *Nothing could be more damaging.* Parishioners need to grieve, reflect, celebrate and give thanks. That's why this plan focuses so much on commemorating the pandemic through a permanent memorial, offering nights of reflection and throwing a huge reopening celebration. These steps are crucial because we all just went through a crazy, confusing, spiritually demanding mess of a pandemic. A reopening plan that acknowledges that pain and helps give meaning to your parishioners' suffering will be a successful one.

That's why we created our plan around the themes of **commemorate → rebuild → expand**. The *commemoration* gives parishioners permission to offer up all their past experiences and current emotions to the Lord, *rebuilding* lets them serve in a healthy and hopeful way and *expanding* gives everyone a chance to pour themselves out in service on behalf of the Body of Christ.

4. *Rebuild and expand on the good:* Despite all the 2020 – 2021 challenges, a lot of good has come out of the pandemic. It's likely your parish took some huge steps forward over the last year. Maybe you're now reaching homebound parishioners with your livestreamed Masses, or perhaps you found success hosting a virtual fundraising gala. If you're like most parishes, your database has taken a big leap forward and is suddenly overflowing with new email addresses and up-to-date phone numbers.

Likewise, your parishioners experienced some good things: more silence for prayer, closer bonds between family members in the same house and a renewed sense of appreciation for what in-person worship means. The crucible of the pandemic has likely refined many individuals in your parish community and spurred them on to new heights of holiness. **They are ready to be called to mission.** If you can bring all these pieces together, your parish will truly be better and stronger in 2021 and beyond.

5. *Celebrate the Sunday obligation:* There's some real trepidation among pastors that the return of the Sunday obligation might feel like a burden for some households. Of course, we know it's not, but you will need to frame it in a positive light, nonetheless. Whenever you reopen, commit to blowing the roof off with the solemnity and joy of your liturgies. Dedicate homilies and letters to the beauty of the Mass and the happiness that its full return brings. Start planning now for the smells, bells, full choirs, legions of altar servers and songs you're going to sing. 2021 will be an incredible opportunity for us all to draw closer to the Eucharist and rest in the beauty of the Mass.
6. *Capitalize on the hunger to serve:* It's likely that your most faithful volunteers have been sidelined while they waited to be vaccinated. You have dozens, perhaps hundreds of parishioners who hunger to be of service after so many months of inactivity. Whether it's deferred maintenance, grounds work, returning hymnals to pews, database cleanup, door-to-door evangelization or delivering food to the needy, engaging your parishioners in service will benefit everyone. It's also an excellent way to draw in the youth of your parish. Put them to work on a project that allows them to interact with each other and key adult leaders in your community. Make sure the project is something tangible, so years from now they can point to it and say, "I helped with that...right after the pandemic."
7. *The timeline will be fluid:* The lack of certainty about vaccines, the easing of restrictions and the end of masking can be paralyzing. But it's clear that people *just need reasons for hope* right now. It is a laudable practice to start penciling in various reopening events and communicating with your parishioners about your plan. Given the pandemic fatigue everyone is experiencing, you're going to bring a lot of happiness when you send that letter that reads, "Here's what we are thinking for our big 'welcome back' bash..."

Is it possible your plans will need to change? Yes. Might you waste some postage or effort if you don't get every item exactly right? Yes. But it's worth it. Give your community something to look forward to. "Be not afraid" is the phrase to keep in mind.

8. *Your plan needs to be flexible:* Building on the point above, it's important that you build a flexible plan because you know there will be setbacks. For example, in our "Sample Parish Summary," we imagine a reopening Mass and Eucharistic procession on the Solemnity of Corpus Christi. However, if that date doesn't work for your community, that doesn't mean your parish can't have a procession later in the year. By using digital tools, you can easily communicate your changing plans efficiently – so don't worry too much if Plan A becomes Plan B.
9. *Have the livestreaming conversation now:* Your parish may already have a plan about whether you continue livestreaming your Masses or not. Be sure to gather input from

your homebound parishioners before you make a final decision (you'll note that one of the first things in our plan is that parishioner survey). You might find out they really do prefer Mass on EWTN and receiving the Eucharist once a week from a parish visitor. Or, you might have hundreds of elderly individuals who have fallen in love with your livestreamed Mass and can't imagine going back to a generic national broadcast. There won't be a plan that fits every parish, so take the time to discuss this and investigate the pros and cons before finalizing the plan that works for you.

10. *Online communications, promotions and fundraising will continue:* We were already living through the great digital transformation in early the 21st century. COVID just sped things up. Don't expect that you'll be shutting down your Facebook page, website or e-newsletter anytime soon. These tools have proved themselves too valuable to abandon, and if you pull the plug on them, you're cutting off a vital communication channel between the parish office and your parishioners. No matter what you do, or how you re-open your parish, you should make regular digital communications a part of your ongoing plan. A strong digital presence is important so you can reach your existing parishioners, but it's also worth remembering that your social media feed (or lack thereof) is the first impression you make to every young family who is considering joining your parish.

In closing...

Above all, recognize that marking the strange and difficult time of the pandemic is crucial to everyone's healing process. Everyone deserves an opportunity to reflect, grieve and offer themselves to God and his Church in a new way in 2021. And if you go the extra mile, your entire parish community will benefit.

As your parish adapts, please let me know how you're doing! Write me at nic@prengersolutions.com and let me know if you'd like access to the complete "Parish Welcome Back Plan." There's no need to reinvent the wheel – we have it all ready for you.