

# The post-pandemic church will need to wipe out, spread out and reach out!

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April 17,  
2020



*By Ravi Waldon, AIA, LEED AP*

**As we all sit glued to the news, praying that God will protect us and help us to be the light in the community, we wonder what post-pandemic USA 2.0 will look like.**

**Given the sorrow COVID-19 brought and the economic damage ensuing, how do churches navigate?**



*“Outdoor environments need to be designed and used in conjunction with indoor fellowship spaces to create additional settings for gathering and conversation.” (Photo provided by Waldon Studio Architects & Planners, PC)*

We all want community and fellowship, but social distancing has forced us to do the opposite. Churches have had to be creative connecting with their people and serving its core mission of loving our neighbors.

Someone said, “The church has left the building.” That is a wonderful thing to ponder.

As an architect, I heartily agree that, in the absolute sense, church organizations don’t need buildings to be “The Church” Christ means for His people to be. However, how does one build opportunities for fellowship, corporate worship, discipleship, and learning without facilities?

Social media is changing a lot of that, and its impact will likely be permanent. The digital connectivity that is more familiar to younger people is now being forced upon older generations. In addition to livestreamed worship services, churches are now providing online teaching and prayer gatherings, and have increased the amount of digital content they produce to communicate better and more often. Creative teams have been working (more) overtime!

So, what’s next? The post-pandemic church will need to *wipe out, spread out and reach out!*

**Wipe out!**

Bright and modern facilities aren't useful if they aren't sanitary. More than ever, cleaning and maintenance programs of churches are critical. From the choice of disinfectants on a daily basis to the big-dollar choices of quality building materials and air handling systems, more healthy design choices can't be ignored in sacrifice of first-cost savings. Technologies such as ultraviolet light air purification systems will become more-widely adopted as a part of air quality design.

The choices of furniture and textiles will need to more intensely consider antimicrobial properties and cleanability. Wall, ceiling and floor finishes need to be considered for easy maintenance and durability against stronger cleaners.

### **Spread out!**



*"In existing fellowship spaces, smaller measures can be taken, like replacing couches with lounge chairs." (Photo provided by Waldon Studio Architects & Planners, PC)*

Social distancing has changed the definition of personal space, but a 6-foot spacing is impractical, post-pandemic. We have designed worship spaces for café-style tables that spread people out, and we're currently designing a "drive-in" event venue — but for most situations, expanding our personal bubble requires too much real estate. More space requires more money, and we need to look for practical and balanced solutions.

**Church sanctuaries** will continue to be arranged in rows unless we move fully to online church. However, architects' and building code formulas for density might begin to allow for more vacant chairs between family units, wider aisles, and expanded row spacing from the

standard 36 inches to 42 inches or more.

**Educational spaces** might look to smaller classroom sizes to maintain smaller gatherings of people, and seating arrangements might be more circular or looser to prevent people from sneezing directly on each other.

**Circulation spaces** need to widen, and lobby spaces need to allow for less density. All these things will need to be figured out, and a new normal will be found. We will discover what that balance is in the near future.

In existing fellowship spaces, smaller measures can be taken, like replacing couches with lounge chairs. Outdoor environments need to be designed and used in conjunction with indoor fellowship spaces to create additional settings for gathering and conversation.

### **Reach out!**

Maybe the biggest impact of all will be the integration of video and streaming technology to the daily flow of our lives. Church and business staffs alike are collaborating remotely using Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or GoToMeeting regularly.

Churches that had not streamed their services online, pre-pandemic, are now figuring out how. The pandemic has accelerated the use and acceptance of video technology at a much faster pace, and it's becoming normal. As video begins replacing in-person meetings and teaching, we might see churches prioritize fellowship and collective gatherings spaces over teaching and classroom spaces.

Whatever the future holds, God is in control and facilities will adjust to the most effective means to support the ministry.

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