



Leading the Charge with Infection Control: How To Keep Your Churches and Sports Ministries Safe Amidst COVID-19

By David Reimann

I saw a clever sign reading, “Wash your hands and say your prayers, because Jesus and germs are everywhere!” During a worldwide pandemic, this statement hits home now more than ever.

As state governors around the country prepare to lift their lockdown orders, we are all facing a great deal of uncertainty. Our commitment to social distancing over the last several weeks has helped prevent the pandemic from overrunning our communities. But to keep another outbreak from forcing us back indoors, we need new and effective strategies for staying safe.

What does that mean for churches, especially those offering sports ministries? How can church communities safely go back out onto the sports field, reopen their gyms and start sharing God’s word together again?

One thing is clear right from the start: as you contemplate restarting your onsite ministries, there can be no going back to business as usual. The novel coronavirus is a deadly pathogen, and we’ll have to remain vigilant, maybe even for months.

But the new cleaning, disinfecting and safety challenges we face are an opportunity, not a setback. Every church is a place where God meets with His people. By incorporating the best safety and infection control practices into their ministries, churches can help bring hope, confidence and peace of mind to God’s people. Safety and protection against COVID-19 is one of the best gifts that churches can give their members, and it’s vitally important that churches get it right.

While every church has its own unique situation, here are just a few tips to help guide you in infection control and prevention in your church and on the field when the time comes to re-engage.

Social Distancing Still Matters, Even if You're Outside

People may tend to think that the end of the lockdown means the end of social distancing, but this isn't true. We know that the novel coronavirus is primarily spread through airborne respiratory particles and tightly packed crowds are still a hotbed for infection. As a society, we must adapt to the new reality that crowds are still unsafe at this time.

But that doesn't preclude you from offering onsite ministries and sports leagues – in fact, hurting communities may need these activities now more than ever. But we must take a flexible approach to re-engagement. In practice, that might mean simple things like running sports practices with smaller teams, avoiding team huddles or switching from tackle to flag football. During sports games or practices, parents may need to watch from the car, or set chairs up in a way that maintains social distancing, rather than crowding together at the sidelines or in the bleachers.

For some sports, like soccer, social distancing on the field might not be too difficult, while for others, like basketball, courts and gymnasium will present more of a challenge. But you can also fight viral spread by spacing out practices, allowing time to sanitize in-between, and limiting the number people on the court at any given time. Of course, handling sports equipment should look different too. That's where personal hygiene comes in.

Practice Sanitation as a Mutual Partnership and Teach Good Personal Hygiene

One of the most important things to remember is that we're all in this together. The best protection against a viral pathogen like COVID-19 is a community in which everyone individually does their part. To that end, you absolutely should provide clear and effective guidance for personal hygiene to all your church members.

Personal hygiene starts with hand washing and watching out for others. Everyone could be a carrier for the virus, whether they feel sick or not. Washing your hands properly, wearing masks whenever possible and cleaning all utensils, tools or equipment that you use are easy but highly effective ways to stop the virus in its tracks. Encourage participants to bring their own water bottles to minimize use of shared water fountains or sinks.

You can't go wrong by erring on the side of caution. Make sure you have hand sanitizer and sanitary wipes on hand, preferably of the sort that kill 99.99% of germs. In between plays or after a practice drill, wipe down balls and clean whatever shared equipment you can. The same goes for disinfecting church pews, hymnals or other items in between services.

While all this may seem time intensive, and will certainly involve a lot of cleaning, it is absolutely worth it to ensure the safety and health of your players, coaches and families.

Practice Vigilance and Frequently Clean, Sanitize and Disinfect Your Community Spaces

We all may be used to a cavalier attitude about sickness or injury. Sometimes, a kid splits his lip after a rough play or starts to feel sick towards the end of a practice. In normal times, we wouldn't worry too much about these incidents. But during this pandemic, we need to be extra vigilant. Anyone who shows symptoms of illness should isolate themselves for the safety of others. Coaches should be prepared to shut down a sports practice whenever someone seems sick. Ministers should be ready to cancel church services or other onsite ministries for the same reasons.

Beyond this extra vigilance, church leaders and sports coaches need to know and understand the basic "process protocols" to use in cleaning their community spaces effectively. It's not enough just to clean for appearance anymore; one must clean for health. It's one thing for a space to look good, and it's another for it actually to be clean, sanitized and disinfected. In particular, cleaning off dirt and grime won't disinfect and inactivate a virus. This is only preparing the surfaces to be disinfected.

When you do start disinfecting, be cautious of wipes and all-purpose cleaners with only a 99.9% germ killing claim. While these might sanitize, or reduce pathogens to safe levels, they still leave some potential of an active virus on surfaces which can lead to infection. To fight COVID-19, you need to use disinfectants to scrub down shared spaces like kitchens, locker rooms, bleachers and church pews. Disinfectants with claims of 99.99% effectiveness or higher are ideal for killing bacteria and inactivating virus. For comparison, a hospital grade disinfectant is typically 99.9999% effective.

Another tip: Avoid using bleach! This highly corrosive agent can be harmful to surfaces, guests and even to those applying it. There are plenty of other cleaning, sanitizing and disinfecting solutions that are less toxic and do a better job.

Being proactive about infection prevention also means frequent and regular cleaning and disinfecting. This should be part of your “processing protocol.” A space is only as safe as the last person who used it. Every use adds the risk of new potential contaminations. With this in mind, church and sports spaces need to be “processed” after every service, meeting, practice or game.

Keep in mind that most disinfectants take anywhere from 5 - 10 minutes of dwell time, or drying time, before they effectively inactivate any virus that may be present. So, one way to keep a space safe is to stagger its use. You might have practice or a church service from 10-11am, then once you’ve completed your “process protocols” to make your space safe, wait another 10-15 minutes before allowing your space to be used again. It might also help to form a dedicated team of volunteers who take on this task.

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

Lastly, you can’t overcommunicate about your church’s guidelines, “process protocols” and safety plans! Go out of the way to keep everyone in the loop. Post personal hygiene and sanitation guidelines in public areas so people are always informed. Be in touch with the local health authorities to stay abreast of the latest COVID-19 news and to keep your church congregation or sports league up to date.

And most of all, stick to whatever plan or guidelines you communicate. Everyone, from pastors, to coaches, to parents and kids should follow the same set of expectations, otherwise your safety precautions won’t be effective. Good communication will promote mutual responsibility.

As mentioned before, every church community will have to forge its own unique path ahead in the days to come. But by following the above-outlined guidelines, you can be sure you’re setting off in the right direction.

All your efforts will matter. They show that your church cares deeply about people, their health and their safety. By leading the way in proper infection prevention, you’ll be opening up opportunities not only for re-engagement, but for ministry too.

David Reimann serves as vice president of sales and marketing for Victory Innovations, a manufacturer who is leading the charge in infection prevention technology and making our hospitals, schools, churches and communities safer.

