



STARTING UP SAFELY

Friendship Groups

- We have all missed our Friendship groups. Staying connected through our weekly meetings, Summer Friendship Gatherings, and personal contact means so much to us. It is sad, but the pandemic has dramatically changed the ministry we have together.
- In the midst of this virus, we find encouragement when we hear about your courage and creativity. Everyone who participated in one of the Summer Friendship Gatherings was excited to be back together. It is vital that we stay connected as a Christian community. I wish I had a nickel for every time I was asked if the Friendship groups will start meeting this fall.
- But, just as we plan to start back up, so does the pandemic. We all want our Friendship groups to start up, but is it the best decision for your group?
- Please know that Connection Ministries will not pressure you to restart your group, nor tell you to wait.
- Instead, we will offer questions for you to research along with some commonsense guidelines. The answers to these questions and the guidelines will help your Friendship group make wise decisions for everyone in your group.
- Much has happened during the past year, and we felt it was time to update the video. This video will share information provided by the Christian Law Association in an article titled “COVID-19 Suggested Church Reopening Guidelines”. We also gathered information from several churches who are wrestling with these same concerns.

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STARTING UP SAFELY FRIENDSHIP GROUPS CONTINUED

- Since the Friendship group is a ministry of your church, first find out if your church will allow the Friendship group to start meeting again. Your church policy as well as local requirements will be the starting place for your group. Some of the guidelines offered in this video may compliment your churches procedures.
- Some questions to ask church leadership could be, “What is the church’s policy on groups meeting in the church?” and “What are the procedure for these meetings?”
- You will also need to research restrictions or guidelines in your local community that will influence groups that meet in your church. Some of these requirements may include wearing masks, social distancing, number of people, washing hands, vaccinations and even taking temperatures.
- Every Friendship group needs a detailed safety procedure to help the friends with disabilities, their families, service providers, and volunteers feel safe returning to the Friendship group.
- You may want to review the roster of everyone who attends the Friendship group and determine if everyone should attend.
- The reference article we used for this video encourages individuals who have a higher risk of contracting Covid-19 and people in contact with them to either stay home or practice social distancing.
- The people in this risk group include:
 - people 65 years and older,
 - those living in a nursing home or long-term care facility,
 - and anyone, regardless of age, with underlying medical conditions, such as asthma, heart conditions, severe obesity, diabetes, and lung disease,
 - those who are not vaccinated.
- Anyone who participates in a Friendship group, or their guardian, should consider these risk factors and decide if this is the right time to meet in their Friendship group.

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- For the people in your group who are not able to meet in person, find out if they are able to join virtually through Zoom or another video communication network. This is not a perfect solution, but it is working for some groups.
- It will be important to find ways to remain connected to the participants who are not able to participate in person or virtually.
- Is the space you used for the Friendship group before the pandemic still suitable? A space that was satisfactory pre-pandemic may not meet the social distancing requirements needed today.
- Does the space allow for proper social distancing between individuals or household groups? Will small discussion groups spaces allow for social distancing? We heard from Friendship leaders who are changing the spaces their Friendship group uses.
- Are you able to move your group to a larger auditorium style worship and lesson space? You would be able to remove or block off seats for every other row.
- Ask individuals or household groups sitting together to leave seats open between them to maintain the proper social distance from others. People living in the same household bubble may be able to sit together.
- Do you need to make your discussion groups smaller? When sitting at tables, can you leave enough space to maintain social distancing?
- Your group should also develop an arrival and departure procedure that maintains social distancing when entering or leaving the facility.
- Consider a greeting table with a volunteer companion who will assist everyone with hand sanitizer and their nametag. Try not to let everyone handle other people's nametags.

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- If you are requiring facemasks, be sure masks are available at the greeting table. You may also want to consider having a thermometer available in your first aid kit. If you require temperatures taken, someone should be at the greeting table to take temperatures with a “no contact” thermometer.
- Low cost, no contact, infrared thermometers are priced around \$30.
- Be sure to disinfect all high-contact surfaces before and after each meeting. This includes but is not limited to;
 - nametags
 - tables
 - chairs
 - doorknobs
 - light switches
 - countertops
 - handles
 - bathroom toilets, faucets, and sinks
- Be sure hand sanitizer and sanitizing wipes are readily available in all common and meeting areas, as well as the bathrooms.
- The use of bathrooms could be a concern. The bathrooms that will be used need to be sanitized before each Friendship group meeting.
- Encourage family members and direct support staff to have everyone use the bathroom before they arrive at the church to limit bathroom usage during the meeting.
- There will still be individuals who will need to use the bathroom. Anyone using the facilities or assisting friends with disabilities need to maintain social distancing and sanitize surfaces that were touched before leaving.
- Family members and direct support staff should assist the individuals who are in their care. Make sure those who use the bathroom properly wash their hands before leaving. Remember that soap and water is perfectly fine as a sanitizing agent.

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- Have you communicated to everyone in your Friendship group and caregivers that they should not come to Friendship meetings if they are not feeling well, show any Covid-19 symptoms, or test positive for Covid-19? There should be a sign at your greeting table reminding people as they arrive.
- These symptoms include;
 - fever
 - cough
 - shortness of breath
 - chills
 - repeated shaking
 - muscle pain
 - headache
 - sore throat, or
 - new loss of taste or smell or other neurological issue
- Our Friendship groups have always been welcoming places, and many want to give hugs. Sadly, we need to replace hugs and handshakes with no-contact greetings. For now, avoid shaking hands, high fives, hugging, and any greeting that involves physical touch.
- Any person who;
 - is not willing or able to follow these attendance requirements,
 - is not feeling well,
 - has exhibited symptoms associated with COVID-19 in the last 14 days,
 - has been in contact with someone who exhibited symptoms associated with COVID-19 in the last 14 days,
 - has an elevated temperature above 100 degrees;
- should receive a respectful explanation why they cannot stay and politely asked to leave.

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- Bible lessons should be prepared to avoid handout materials. Visuals aids are still important, so use projection screens or large posters. If you have not used technology in the past, this may be the best reason to start. For now, we do not recommend the use of song bulletins, hymnals, or musical instruments.
- Avoid the use of craft projects that use shared supplies, including but not limited to, glue, crayons, pencils, and scissors. Craft projects should be pre-packaged kits that do not require additional supplies.
- I have always been an advocate of snacks during fellowship time. I especially enjoy attending special events when food is served. This is another area where we need to be cautious.
- It is recommended that you use pre-packaged snacks with individual drink servings. You still need to practice proper social distancing during snack time.
- If the Friendship group includes communion as part of your meetings, it is recommended that you use prepackaged communion kits, with individualized cups and wafers. However, this may not be feasible if members of your group are unable to open the communion kit unassisted.
- As you listen to these guidelines, you might feel a bit overwhelmed, and think it is impossible to start meeting this fall.
- If your church has suitable outdoor space, you might consider outdoor gatherings. While the weather is still good, outdoor events could be scheduled weekly, or at least periodically. Some Friendship groups have hosted parking lot worship services and have even used city parks.
- Be aware that social distancing can be harder to enforce in an outdoor setting, so plan your event to keep attendees from clustering.

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- Whether you are meeting in person or not, we can also offer each other some old fashion kindness. We all love to receive a card or a letter where someone thought enough to write a personal note. Make your friend's day!
- Write a letter, make a call, or visit their home with a card and some pre-packaged snacks. Your kindness will illuminate God's love in your friend's heart.

 <https://connection-ministries.org>