

# PHASE TWO OF NORTHERN VIRGINIA REOPENING GUIDANCE FOR SMALL GROUPS JUNE 23, 2020

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As of June 19, 2020, all of our MBC locations are now in Phase 2 of reopening, including Montgomery County.

In Phase Two, gatherings of up to fifty people are now permitted, which means that some of our small groups may choose to begin meeting in person again. We are providing this document to offer guidance to our small group leaders and to our members as you navigate this important decision.

Many are asking “Is it now safe to meet in groups in our homes?” The answer to that question, in a very technical sense, is that there is still a risk of community coronavirus transmission associated with larger meetings, both for you personally and for those who might meet with you in your home. Greater Washington, DC is an area of high population density and high levels of regional, national and international travel. All of these factors, together with sustained levels of confirmed positive test results, indicate that there is still community virus transmission present here.

In light of this reality, it is certainly reasonable for your group to continue meeting online. If you do choose to meet as a group in person now that Phase Two has begun, there are steps that you can take to decrease the risk of virus transmission. Our review of local, state and federal guidance on this issue indicates the following:

- **Outdoor gatherings are safer than indoor gatherings.** If at all possible, we would *strongly* recommend that your groups meet outdoors if you choose to meet in person. This might mean meeting in backyards, or driveways, or local parks. It might also mean that everyone brings a lawn chair, and that meeting days or meeting times may need to be flexible in light of the weather.

- **Social distancing is still required.** In each and every phase of reopening, every jurisdiction around the country mandates maintaining at least six feet of distance from anyone who is not in your household. In indoor settings (such as the potential return to school and the reopening of exercise establishments), many jurisdictions are requiring more than ten feet of separation.
- **Implement and enforce symptom verification.** In our new normal, larger gatherings will now require some form of verification that attendees 1) have not been diagnosed with COVID-19; 2) are not currently experiencing symptoms of COVID-19; and 3) have not been exposed to anyone who is experiencing symptoms or who has received a positive diagnosis of COVID-19. This verification can be done in advance of each meeting by text or email, by written waiver in advance of your first attendance in person, or by agreement from the entire group as you make the decision to begin meeting again. There are Virginia Waiver Forms available online.
- **Masks are still encouraged and permissible.** In light of varying individual responses and risk tolerances associated with reopening, many people have made personal decisions on when (and when not) to wear a mask. Virginia and Maryland law both require a mask for any public gathering indoors. In addition, masks are strongly encouraged in other circumstances, including for older or more vulnerable populations.
- **Do not shake hands or hug.** This will be a huge temptation for almost everyone, and a huge loss for many of us. In this unique season, though, we strongly recommend that social distance be maintained, even with close friends.
- **Provide hand sanitizer.** It is possible to transmit the coronavirus through the use of shared surfaces such as doorknobs, tables, etc. To help reduce the risk of shared use transmission, the CDC recommends the liberal use of hand sanitizer in public settings.
- **Make a plan for restrooms.** This is a tricky one. If the meeting is at your home – even outside – please decide in advance whether to make your bathroom(s) available to those in attendance. If so, please also make a plan for cleaning after each use in accordance with CDC Guidelines. If not, please plan to communicate to your group whether bathrooms will be accessible at your meeting.

In even sending these new guidelines to you, we know that many of you as group leaders and hosts are being put in a new and very difficult position. While you cannot guarantee a safe and virus-free environment in your home (no one can, even in your backyard or driveway), these recommended steps will help reduce the risk of transmission. Even for those of you who are in low risk categories, it will be helpful to communicate to your group that you are taking these steps in advance of any group meeting. This will allow your group members to make their own informed decision as they evaluate their own risk.

To that end, we suggest circulating this document to your group members with an affirmation that you will follow these guidelines. We also strongly recommend that you receive affirmation from your group members that they have received and will follow these guidelines as well, including the affirmation that their attendance at any gathering means that they have not been exposed and are not currently experiencing symptoms. For those who want even more detailed guidance on reducing risk, you can access individual CDC recommendations here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html>

One other challenge we want to acknowledge is that many of the guidelines above make our core mission more difficult. It is hard to be together but maintain distance. It is hard not to hug someone who is hurting. It is hard to constantly remember to follow rules. In the midst of this new normal, and especially in the midst of shepherding the body of Christ in the midst of these challenges, we want to offer some practical guidance to that end as well.

- **Be Understanding.** While many members may want to meet together in person, not all group members may feel comfortable doing so, and that's ok! If others choose to not meet in person, look for ways to include them when you do gather, such as video conference them in.
- **Be Considerate of Your Host's Home.** If your group is meeting in someone's backyard or home, go out of your way to make sure you respect the "rules of the home" (e.g. what entrance or restroom to use, would they like individuals to wash hands on arrival, what parts of the house/property should people avoid, etc...). At the beginning of each meeting, hosts should communicate the house rules ahead of time so everyone knows what to expect. As group members arrive and are not sure if the host is comfortable with something, encourage them to not assume, but rather to ask questions to get clarification.

- **Be Respectful of Neighbors and Neighborhoods.** If groups are meeting in people's homes, it's important to realize that various neighbors might not be at the same comfort level as your group when it comes to meeting together. Please keep this in mind in how/where you park and where you walk. Maintain social distancing!
- **Be Smart regarding Food.** As much as we love to be good hosts, we recommend that people bring their own food/snacks/drinks rather than setting out items for people to share.
- **A Note About Kids.** Many younger children cannot social distance and/or wear a mask. We know there is no hard and fast rule governing the specific ages of children that might be able to observe specific rules for specific lengths of time. Out of an abundance of caution, however, we recommend that groups with children continue meeting online for now.

For even more practical advice in shepherding in this unique and challenging season, our friends at The Village Church in Dallas have compiled a small number of excerpts on small group guidance that address specific issues that may arise as you regather. We are including that guidance below as well to help prepare and equip you as you lead.

## PRAY AND PRACTICE THE ONE ANOTHERS

Whether it's gender-specific nights twice a month to accommodate for child care and physical distancing, Zoom calls all together the other times, meetings and prayer in a front yard, in a parking lot spaced out, masks, no masks, some masks, this ongoing pandemic will test our one another culture, so begin with praying these Scriptures specifically. Pray as a leader over your group and as a group together. Ask the Lord to make us this kind of people.

### THE "59 ONE ANOTHERS"

1. "...Be at peace with each other." (Mark 9:50)
2. "...Wash one another's feet." (John 13:14)
3. "...Love one another..." (John 13:34)
4. "...Love one another..." (John 13:34)
5. "...Love one another..." (John 13:35)
6. "...Love one another..." (John 15:12)
7. "...Love one another" (John 15:17)
8. "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love..." (Romans 12:10)
9. "...Honor one another above yourselves. (Romans 12:10)
10. "Live in harmony with one another..." (Romans 12:16)
11. "...Love one another..." (Romans 13:8)
12. "...Stop passing judgment on one another." (Romans 14:13)

13. "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you..." (Romans 15:7)
14. "...Instruct one another." (Romans 15:14)
15. "Greet one another with a holy kiss..." (Romans 16:16)
16. "...When you come together to eat, wait for each other." (I Cor. 11:33)
17. "...Have equal concern for each other." (I Corinthians 12:25)
18. "...Greet one another with a holy kiss." (I Corinthians 16:20)
19. "Greet one another with a holy kiss." (II Corinthians 13:12)
20. "...Serve one another in love." (Galatians 5:13)
21. "If you keep on biting and devouring each other...you will be destroyed by each other." (Galatians 5:15)
22. "Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other." (Galatians 5:26)
23. "Carry each other's burdens..." (Galatians 6:2)
24. "...Be patient, bearing with one another in love." (Ephesians 4:2)
25. "Be kind and compassionate to one another..." (Ephesians 4:32)
26. "...Forgiving each other..." (Ephesians 4:32)
27. "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs." (Ephesians 5:19)
28. "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." (Ephesians 5:21)
29. "...In humility consider others better than yourselves." (Philippians 2:3)
30. "Do not lie to each other..." (Colossians 3:9)
31. "Bear with each other..." (Colossians 3:13)
32. "...Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another." (Colossians 3:13)
33. "Teach...[one another]" (Colossians 3:16)
34. "...Admonish one another (Colossians 3:16)
35. "...Make your love increase and overflow for each other." (I Thessalonians 3:12)
36. "...Love each other." (I Thessalonians 4:9)
37. "...Encourage each other..."(I Thessalonians 4:18)
38. "...Encourage each other..." I Thessalonians 5:11)
39. "...Build each other up..." (I Thessalonians 5:11)
40. "Encourage one another daily..." Hebrews 3:13)
41. "...Spur one another on toward love and good deeds." (Hebrews 10:24)
42. "...Encourage one another." (Hebrews 10:25)
43. "...Do not slander one another." (James 4:11)
44. "Don't grumble against each other..." (James 5:9)
45. "Confess your sins to each other..." (James 5:16)
46. "...Pray for each other." (James 5:16)
47. "...Love one another deeply, from the heart." (I Peter 3:8)
48. "...Live in harmony with one another..." (I Peter 3:8)
49. "...Love each other deeply..." (I Peter 4:8)
50. "Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling." (I Peter 4:9)
51. "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others..." (I Peter 4:10)
52. "...Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another..."(I Peter 5:5)
53. "Greet one another with a kiss of love." (I Peter 5:14)
54. "...Love one another." (I John 3:11)
55. "...Love one another." (I John 3:23)
56. "...Love one another." (I John 4:7)
57. "...Love one another." (I John 4:11)
58. "...Love one another." (I John 4:12)
59. "...Love one another." (II John 5)

# POLITICS AND YOUR HOME GROUP

As group leaders, you take a lead role in maturing disciples of Jesus Christ. Tense conversations are often part of growth together.

Perhaps nowhere is that becoming more apparent in the 21st century than in our politics. Even when we aren't facing a global pandemic, "fruitful, meaningful, and productive political conversations can't be had if we jump to conclusions about each other."

Politics may be defined as "the struggle that determines who gets what when and how." They are rife with contention, war, conflict, influence, and power. The Church does not wrestle against flesh and blood. We are in a spiritual battle of Word, love, and actions. **Our call is to maintain the unity of the Spirit.**

Here are some ground rules for navigating political conversations in your group:

1. If you want to talk politics, it's best to do so face-to-face.
2. Respect one another. Does this conversation seek to practice the "one anothers" of Scripture?
3. Speak with honesty and candor. If you disagree, say so politely. If a statement is hurtful, say that it was, and be quick to forgive. If you say a hurtful statement, be quick to apologize and seek forgiveness.
4. Give goodwill. Are you seeking to understand over being understood or validated? Are you seeking to be right over being righteous?
5. Be informed. And be okay admitting if you are not and wish to talk about something else.
6. Listen Well. We've all felt the temptation to seek to be understood before first seeking understanding from others but learning to listen well can go a long way. Encourage your group members to ask clarifying questions of each other to gain deeper understanding, particularly from those with different experiences or perspectives (Prov. 18:2; James 1:19-20). Establish ground rules for discussion and give people the freedom to share openly about their own experiences and understanding. Allowing your group to be a safe place can lead to a healthier and God-honoring group experience.

# OFFERING COMFORT IN JOB LOSS, REDUCTIONS, AND OTHER CHALLENGING REALITIES

A major aspect we are hearing in our church body is that some are facing job loss and others significant pay reductions. And many of us may be asking (or expecting) if we are next.

How will we minister to one another through the suffering and loss that comes our way in this pandemic? The answer is comfort. “A shock absorber system in a car doesn’t eliminate the bumps in the road,” Tim Keller says, “but it keeps the car from being shaken into pieces by the bumps. You have to have sources of comfort and strength when you go through suffering—not that it eliminates the suffering, but that suffering won’t actually shake you to pieces.”

Job had three friends (a small group, you might say). They show up, and from chapter 3 all the way into the 20s, they speak to Job in cycles to try to comfort him, to try to help him interpret and understand his suffering. And they do an absolutely terrible job of comforting.

Yet, even by looking at how they don’t comfort well, we can learn something about where sources of comfort can come from as we care for one another in group life.

## **Bad Comfort**

Eliphaz brings a list (Job 4-5). He brings the so-called logic and principles. He’s heard Job crying out in agony. And Eliphaz tells his suffering friend, “Stop your belly-aching, stop your praying, stop your emoting and blubbering. Figure out what you’re doing wrong, where you can get another (better) job, pull yourself together, and get back out there.”

This doesn’t grasp the biblical complexity of human existence. A checklist of questions like, “Have you sinned? Are you believing the promises? Are you confessing sins? Are you reading your Bible? Are you doing your spiritual disciplines? You gotta figure out what God is trying to do here,” may not be what a group member in suffering needs. They may need you to listen, to cry. They may need a hug and ministry of presence, not words or lists. Better comfort is a ministry mix of truth and tears.

## **Better Comfort**

Job responds to Eliphaz with his own self counseling (Job 6). You see this kind of example also in Psalm 42. Job does a healthier job and sets a model for how we might also comfort one another. Would that one of his small group members knew to provide such comfort! Job displayed better comfort through:

1. *Emotional realism* – Job expresses how he really feels—no cleaning it up. He does so in a small group of trusted friends and with God.
2. *Prayer* – In Job 6:8, he prays, admitting that he hopes God would really grant what he’s asking. Job says hard things about God, but he says them to God. He never stops praying. He stays in relationship with God.
3. *Recognizing God’s keeping him* – “I have not repudiated the words of the Holy One.” The one comfort he has is a clear conscience. He knows God loves him, accepts him, knows him. If you know God, you can comfort. You can be comforted—and kept.

## **Ultimate Comfort**

Job said all of the above knowing that even in his initial response, he was prone to crack. No one has ever perfectly kept all the words of the Holy One. Except One. Jesus Christ could keep every word. He is praiseworthy and excellent. He was righteous and upright and was struck down and destroyed for our sin. He was the only true innocent sufferer, and He also defeated death once for all. If you have a relationship with Him, you are loved and kept.

A question from the Heidelberg Catechism: “What is your only comfort in life and death?”  
Answer: “That I am not my own but belong, body and soul in life and death, to my faithful savior Jesus Christ, who has paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and therefore by His Holy Spirit assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready to live for Him.”

# WHAT NEWS CAN I TRUST? WHAT SHOULD I SHARE?

Recent events have tuned the eyes and ears of Americans toward news sources in ways we have not seen for quite some time. And, as ceaseless reports of disease outbreak, brutal violence, and political fights plaster our screens, believers must be mindful of how we receive our news and what we choose to do with it.

## How Do You Get Your News?

As a journalism student, I was told repeatedly that there is no such thing as objective reporting—an accurate assessment. Every person approaches events from a perspective, an existing worldview or set of assumptions that shape how they perceive and share those events. A reporter's approach is no different.

Because this is true, **Christians must practice discernment when filtering through news updates.** Am I reading that something happened (an event) or what someone thinks about something that happened (a commentary)? Most of the news we receive today is a mixture of both, if not heavier on the commentary side, with the expectation that you take a side. This kind of reporting often buries whatever truth it contains in conjecture and opinion.

Just as very human reporters craft news stories, very human editors make value judgments about which stories to feature and promote. The decision of what goes on the front page and what leads the evening newscast is a worldview decision. Understand this when you consume news reporting and ask yourself:

“Why is this story the lead or on repeat?”

“Is this report concerned with facts?”

“Is there good research that solidly supports this report?”

“Am I being shown what is happening or being told what to think about it?”

A journalist's job is to ask questions, but that's also our job as thinking Christians when we read, hear, or watch a report. Ask questions of the report, the reporter, yourself, your neighbor, and your worldview. And then make a decision about what to do.

## What Do You Do With Your News?

Christians hear news reports through the filter of an objective standard of truth. Having answered the biggest question of all, “Whose world is it anyway?” we’re able to apply the lesser questions that sift fact from commentary—all with an eye toward discerning truth, or at least wisdom and kindness in the navigation of information.

While the bottom line for Christians is truth, the bottom line for networks and newspapers may not be. Journalism is a business, meaning the dollar is often a media corporation’s bottom line. This reality heavily influences reporting. Chasing scandals and political gaffes buffers the bottom line, just not often the one concerned with truth. So, what should we do to ensure we’re well-informed?

Keep digging.

**Steer clear of entertainment news traps and go to the sources most likely to bring you the bottom line of truth.** These probably aren’t trending on your Facebook feed. Begin to identify trusted sources by humbly engaging in several. Consult news sources across the liberal-conservative spectrum to better understand how stories are being shaped. How is one network reporting this story differently than another? Before reflexively sharing with others something that looks and sounds like a news story, check its source. If the source or the article itself is sensational, treat it with healthy suspicion.

**We must also bear in love with compassion (and patience) for those in our groups who may be sharing or posting news or “news.”** Lead out in asking open-ended questions: “What have you heard? What do you know? Where have you found good information on this? How does this align with what the Bible teaches? How will we honor the ‘one another’ commands as we discuss this piece of news?”

Even more, we must **pray as events scroll across the screen.** Develop this discipline. Let your news intake get you out of yourself and move you to pray, and then to act as you are able. Let the news be an instigator to get you involved in all that God is doing in this world that belongs—without hype, sensationalism or slant—to Him.

# WHAT WE ARE LEARNING ABOUT VIRTUAL GROUPS

Small group leaders across the country are learning a lot about what it looks like to try and have a completely online community. Here is a summary of what we are finding and sharing in our discussions.

**Virtual platforms are great for content.** Groups that are formed around the sharing of content for a limited amount of time (a class) seem to do well for the duration of the stated content. While ongoing or in-person community rarely forms, most people stay faithful to finish the online content and discussion.

**Virtual platforms are just okay to supplement existing relationships.** Nationwide, the report is that most small groups that met personally prior to the lockdowns jumped quickly into meeting virtually via Zoom or other video platforms. The desire for in-person grows stronger and continues to be the stated necessity for forming and continuing community.

**Virtual platforms are not able to create nor establish lasting relationships.** Groups that meet for the first time on a virtual platform for the stated purpose of community are rarely able to sustain the group past the first two or three virtual meetings. Aspects like care, meeting needs, and true vulnerability are mentioned as significant challenges in purely digital groups.

# CONTINUING THE COMMUNITY PRACTICE OF THE UNHURRIED PACE

It's hard to fully understand the full brunt force this pandemic has had and will have.

And even with all of the challenges, there have been some great gifts given to the Church. The Lord is clarifying and slowing. I believe we were on a speeding train and didn't know how to get off. Well, we got off, going from business trips, church functions, kids sports, school, and more to nothing, nada, zilch.

The Lord is slowing His Church. Let's not forget this when we enter back into the fray over the coming months. Following Jesus has nothing to do with business and everything to do with unhurried love for God and others.

“All my worst moments are when I'm in a hurry—love, joy, peace are incompatible with hurry.”

“Love is patient, love is kind...”

Psalm 23 does NOT say, “The LORD is my shepherd, therefore I gotta run faster.”

You see, hurry actually says more about you at your core than you think it does.

## **Questions to consider together in your household and in your Home Group before the hurry returns:**

- What does/did your hurry say about what you value? Take it a step further: if you had to stop all of your responsibilities and extracurriculars, what would you feel? Unworthy? Unloved? Free? Why is that?
- Slowing down and listening to the voice of God takes time. How will you take this past season and make changes as it relates to how you spend your time in the years ahead?