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## **EUROPE: When will worship places open again? The cases of Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland**

*There are differences in the expected dates but evangelical organisations are already offering specific recommendations to churches.*

By Joel Forster

Evangelical Focus (05.05.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2WwYGrx> – Governments in Europe continue to plan the re-opening of public spaces, businesses and other facilities.

These de-escalation strategies also affect the community life of faith groups and the use of places of worship.

*Evangelical Focus* asked evangelical leaders in some European countries about how the return to face-to-face worship services could look like. The cases of Austria, Finland, Ireland, Italy and Portugal were presented in a previous article.

### ***Netherlands***

In the Netherlands, it is not yet clear when places of worship will be able to resume their activity. “We don’t know yet”, says the General Director of MissieNederland, Jan Wolsheimer, but it might “not happen before September”.

The special measures that will need to be implemented are similar to those suggested in other countries. “Only services will be allowed where people can have 1.5 meter distance from each other”, and this means “probably 25% of the normal capacity” of church buildings.

The organisation representing evangelical Christians agrees with the governmental measures so far. “I have a weekly appointment with the Secretary of State for Safety and Justice”, explains Wolsheimer.

He encourages churches to “follow the instructions of the parliament, do not take any risks so that the Gospel will stay

good news". Churches should also "look for new opportunities – 'normal' might not come back".

## ***Spain***

Spain is one of the most affected countries in Europe during the coronavirus crisis and the Spanish Evangelical Alliance issued a statement about the ethical issues at stake.

Meanwhile, the Federation of Evangelical Entities (FEREDE) has worked on a "re-opening plan for evangelical places of worship", which includes recommendations such as attending services in small groups, disinfecting all premises after their use, and use face masks. In person gatherings will be allowed when the government's 'De-escalation Phase 1', and 17 May will be the first Sunday to meet again.

But the FEREDE recommends to have only one gathering per week, and reminds churches that "it is possible to continue to virtual meetings, and this option is understandable and correct, since it improves security".

Certificates for pastors who need to visit other provinces (something not allowed yet by the government) will be issued as well.

## ***Sweden***

The situation is very different in Sweden, a country that has

not experienced a complete lockdown during the Covid-19 crisis. "Sweden allows for gatherings with less than 50 participants, so generally only larger churches have had to completely cancel their church services", says Olof Edsinger, secretary General of the Swedish Evangelical Alliance.

But "people over 70 are told to stay away", he adds, "so many smaller churches have lost most of their potential visitors". "Our hope is that it will again be allowed to gather up to 500 people sometime during summer – or otherwise early Fall".

All Swedes are told to keep a distance ("preferably 2 meters, but at least an arm's length") and wash their hands often and with soap.

The Evangelical Alliance agrees with the plans of the government, "but we hope it will be allowed for larger meetings during summer – at least for a 100 people", says Edsinger. "We also think that children and youth, not being a risk group, should be able to go to camps with up to 500 participants".

The Swedish evangelical body encourages churches "to follow the guidelines from our authorities. But also to find the new possibilities in this, for instance gathering in our homes in more of a 'simple church' setting".

### ***Switzerland***

In Switzerland any gathering of more than 5 people is

forbidden, and this measure will not be reviewed before 27 May.

It is not clear when the government will give green light to church gatherings, but the Swiss Evangelical Alliance (SEA) expects measures such as “2 meters of distance between worshippers, controls at the entrance of the building (people at special risk home would be sent home) and hygiene measures (disinfection of hands, renouncing to shake hands...)”.

The number of worshippers allowed in every place of worship “depends on the allowance announced by the government on 27 May”, says the Alliance’s Communication Director Daniela Baumann.

The Swiss Evangelical Alliance “understands” the cautious approach of the Swiss authorities and the limitations implemented and “call churches to respect the measures”. But at the same time, the SEA and other Christian organisations have started a work of “awareness” by asking the government to “address specific church-related questions and needs”, something that has not happened so far.

The Alliance has worked alongside other groups (such as the Federation of Free Churches and the Evangelical Reformed Church) to prepare a “holistic strategy for easing measures in the churches” with recommended best practices.

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