

PRESBYTERY OF THE TWIN CITIES AREA  
2115 Cliff Drive  
Eagan, MN 55122



May 1, 2020

Friends and Colleagues,

Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ.

For nearly eight weeks now, through Lent and Holy Week and now Eastertide, our congregations have done remarkable work in making the shift from in-person ministry and worship to online worship and physically distanced pastoral care. While grateful for new ways of worshipping virtually, for Zoom coffee hours and chats on the phone and times of connecting in prayer, we also long for the familiarity of our sanctuaries and family and friends.

We are now recognizing, however, that returning to church will have to happen in phases. What follows is our best advice based on the information we have, and on our conversations with other church leaders, ecumenical partners, hospital chaplains, government agencies, and PCUSA denominational leadership. We welcome your feedback in return, knowing you have been thinking about these same issues.

First, and for now, **it remains imperative for congregations to refrain from small or large in-person gatherings through at least May 30.** Our commitment must remain with our most vulnerable, and the awareness that testing and treatment are not yet widely enough available to prevent passing even among those who feel well. We simply cannot rush back into business-as-usual.

Second, **we expect a slow and graduated approach to resuming in-person worship and other gatherings,** stretching over many months and which will require our patience and wisdom, advice from our public health experts, and a clear plan for sustainability.

Third, **while we wait, now is the time to begin planning your congregation's staggered approach to resuming in-person worship and other gatherings.** The decisions made now will shape the success of future in-person gatherings of your congregation.

To help you looking forward, we offer some frameworks and questions (both below, and in two attached documents) to guide sessions and congregational leaders. These are not fixed guidelines that will account for every circumstance. Rather, they are the best wisdom for key elements for our future, curated from the widest set of experts, shaped by discernment, and offered in prayer and deep support for your ministries and your members.

## **PHASE 1**

### **Worship/Other In-Person Gatherings:**

We STILL STRONGLY RECOMMEND that...

- congregations continue to gather electronically, and not in person, through at least May 30 (including worship services, Bible studies, small groups, or other ministry/programmatic gatherings). This is consistent with the current stay-at-home policies from the governors of Minnesota and Wisconsin.)

- sessions, committees, deacons and yes - even congregations - should meet electronically. Several PTCA congregations have elected, ordained and installed new officers in virtual meetings and worship services. GA will meet electronically this year, and so can your session and congregation, with the proper advance planning.
- if you do choose to hold in-person gatherings (for instance, life rituals like weddings or funerals), limit the gathering to fewer than 10 people, utilize masks, and practice clear physical distancing at all times.
- staff and clergy minimize time onsite, while remembering the importance of checking in on the safety of the building on a steady basis.
- before *any* in-person gatherings occur, leadership should formulate and communicate a clear and ongoing plan for how to keep buildings clean and sanitized as a means of continuing to flatten the curve and keep people safe.

We CONTINUE TO URGE...

- congregations to maintain and enhance meaningful ways to pre-record, print, or live-stream elements of worship, and to continue to do so, even beyond any first steps toward re-opening.
- congregations to explore online giving for their members.
- attentive protection of the most high-risk individuals (people over 60 and those with underlying conditions) by supporting their ongoing decisions to shelter in place, and being thoughtful about not planning events or experiences during this time that they will feel excluded from attending due to health concerns.

#### **Pastoral Care/Visitation:**

We STILL STRONGLY RECOMMEND that...

- clergy and visitation teams utilize telephone and other electronic means of visiting/connecting with members.
- churches receive consent (preferably written) when doing face-to-face visits with sick members, where permitted by regulation. Please be sure to be in dialogue with the family members who would be impacted by your face-to-face visit. Wear masks and gloves. Though it still feels hard, continue to avoid physical contact.

#### **Mission/Vision:**

We STILL STRONGLY RECOMMEND that congregations continue of our common commitment to the Matthew 25 emphasis of caring for the least of these by...

- practicing and participating in "distance" ministry; and
- remaining connected and offering compassion to the most vulnerable communities who are impacted by this pandemic. Vulnerable communities include but are not limited to people of color, those within refugee/immigrant communities, individuals with pre-existing conditions, those without access to adequate healthcare, and the poor among us who are represented by every race, creed, and color.

#### **ANTICIPATING "PHASE 2"**

There will come a day, perhaps in June or later in the summer, when some of us can begin to gather back in our buildings. As we anticipate phase two, we STRONGLY RECOMMEND that...

- sessions use the month of May to formulate both short- and long-term plans for how to keep buildings clean and sanitized. Using one or both of the attached documents, from General Assembly Co-Moderator Cindy Kohlman or from the Wisconsin Council of

- ❑ Churches, can guide your discussions around the key questions that will need to be answered before we can safely use our buildings again. These include how we will do communion, offering, singing, and traffic patterns for worship; and how our buildings will be regularly and thoroughly cleaned.
- ❑ intentional protocols and guidelines be adopted for when renters/building users are allowed back into the buildings, including assurances that they will observe gathering limits and distancing protocols, and you are able to accommodate their cleaning needs.
- ❑ sessions reach out, to each other and to your Presbytery, to express the kind of answers you are discerning, decisions you are reaching, and continuing support you need in this time. We are in this together, and are stronger together, and can all benefit from shared information.
- ❑ in the spirit of Matthew 25, consider the impact of congregational choices on others:
  - how will extra cleaning responsibilities put greater stress or risk on volunteer or employed facilities/cleaning staff? How will that be compensated or acknowledged?
  - how will choices to gather send messages of *exclusion* or *inclusion* to high-risk populations who may not be “safe” returning to in-person gatherings – even with extra precautions in place.

There are many lessons we are learning from this pandemic experience. Certainly one of them is this: practicing our faith and being the Church does not require stepping into our church buildings. The Body of Christ can be strong in connection and vital in spirit even when we are scattered. God finds us wherever and however we gather, and sits with us in our sorrow and loneliness. And hope can endure the darkest night, because our Easter faith promises us that new life will eventually dawn.

We continue to pray for a spirit of discernment, for wisdom, and patience. We pray for the ill and recovering, and those who care for them physically and spiritually; and for those grieving and struggling with the weightiness of these times. We pray for researchers and scientists and planners. We pray for the watchers and wonderers, and all those who wait upon the Lord. We pray for each of you, giving thanks for the grace, hope, comfort, and peace that you have brought to your communities these past weeks.

On behalf of the whole Presbytery, thank you for being open, creative, faithful, and steadfast leaders in this pandemic crisis. May the God of hope and justice continue to guide your decisions in the coming days and weeks.

Your officers and executive presbyter,

Anna Kendig, Moderator  
 Barbara Lutter, Stated Clerk  
 Steve Robertson, Treasurer

Jean Emmons, Vice-Moderator  
 Rocky Rockenstein, Presbytery Leadership Team Chair  
 Jeffrey Japinga, Executive Presbyter