

Friends,

As I mentioned in my newsletter article back in March suggesting that it was time to stop having in-person worship, I have no authority to tell you what to do. The decision as to whether to stop as well as when to resume in-person worship is up to each session. While I'd like to be able to say that since the government is easing its restrictions, we can just go back to doing worship the way we were before, I can't do that.

Our state government says that groups of 25 or less can now gather. Since the median size of a church in this presbytery according to the 2019 statistical reports is 26 members that would mean most of our churches could safely gather. But it is really safe to go back to doing worship the way we used to do it just yet? I don't think so. Anyway, here are some things I think you need to think about:

If you typically average 25 people or less in worship, as long as you maintain social distancing and wear face masks, you could begin to gather for worship. That needs to be a session decision. Will you proceed by a simple majority vote, only proceed if it's a 2/3 majority, or will you require a unanimous vote on this?

If you have groups smaller than 25 people, which for most churches means the session, committees, youth groups, Sunday school classes, PW circles, and Bible studies among others, will you start meeting again in person, as long as you maintain social distancing and wear masks? Again, that's a session decision. Are you going to proceed if it's a simple majority, only proceed if it's a 2/3 majority, or will you require a unanimous vote on this?

If you do proceed, what kind of cleaning standards will you have both before each meeting as well as after each meeting in your building? There's an old saying, "a lick and a prayer" that could often be applied to church cleaning practices. That's not going to cut it anymore.

If you have 25 people or less in worship and you decide to proceed to meet in person:

- Will you provide face masks for those who don't bring them?
- If people aren't willing to wear face masks, will you ask them to leave?
- How will you designate what pews to sit in? It's been suggested that people sit in every other pew.
- How will you collect the offering? It's probably wise to put the offering plates or a basket to receive offerings at each entrance to the sanctuary, so people don't have to pass them through the pews.
- Will you have bulletins? If so, how will you distribute them? It may be wise to photocopy the scripture readings and hymns to put in the bulletins, so people aren't handling hymnbooks and pew Bibles. It may be wiser to put everything on screens.
- Will you sing hymns? It's been stated that germs can be spread 20 feet while singing. It's also going to be hard to sing wearing a mask.
- Will you have a choir? Can you space them 6 feet (maybe 20 feet) apart? Will it be better to use soloists, duets, or trios? Will you make them wear masks? A strict reading of the government guidelines suggests that's required.
- Will you still do a children's sermon/children's time? Since it's going to be hard to keep children 6 feet apart and/or wear a mask and/or keep them 6 feet away from whoever is leading this, it's probably wise not to include this as a part of worship although I suppose it could be done.
- Getting people into the sanctuary might not be a problem since people don't arrive at the same time. However, everyone leaves at roughly the same time once the service is over. Will you have the pastor or someone else dismiss folks one pew at a time? It

would also seem wise not to have a receiving line at the end of the service to shake the pastor's hand. Where can the pastor stand, so people can talk to him/her if they want or need to do that?

- It may be wise to worship in a fellowship hall, or perhaps outside if you have the space, so people can maintain the appropriate distance from one another.

Perhaps my biggest concern, though, comes when I think about the fact that most of the members of our congregations are over 60 years old. Even if they have a lot of energy, that does not make them immune to the coronavirus. There are also folks younger than that who have lung issues, diabetes, or other conditions that mean they are more likely to be infected. Even if we can legally do so, is it appropriate to put people at risk or to allow them to put themselves at risk?

We could say we are taking a leap of faith in deciding to open our church. I think it's just as possible to say we are being guided by fear if we decide to resume meeting in person. We might be afraid our church won't survive, afraid our budget will be so severely compromised that we will have to cut staff, programs or mission giving or perhaps go to a part-time pastor. (As if that's the end of the world, which it isn't.)

I think the wisest move is to continue online worship for the time being. One presbytery has suggested that their churches wait three weeks after permission is granted to resume gathering for worship before they do so. The thinking is that they should wait and see if new cases spike or if they continue to taper off before they go back to their sanctuary. That makes sense to me.

If your church wants to resume in-person worship, you have that right. I would only tell you to be careful, to think through how you're going to keep people safe, and to consider maintaining your online worship services so that those who don't feel comfortable coming back yet will still be able to worship and maintain connection with your church.

I'm including three articles I have found helpful. One is called "[Returning to Church](#)," which comes from the Wisconsin Council of Churches. The second is "[24 Questions Your Church Should Answer Before People Return](#)" by Ken Braddy, which, though written from a large church perspective, raises questions that all churches need to consider. (Thanks to Rebecca Mihm and Nancy Martin for sharing these resources with me originally.) The final piece, "[Returning to Work and Services](#)," comes from Jeff Carpenter, the presbytery's insurance agent. You may also want to check with your church's insurance agent to see what guidance they might offer.

Since I've been working from home, I frequently find myself exhausted at the end of the day. I frequently find my head spinning from too much information or perhaps too many opinions. I wish I could offer you a definite timeline as well as definite steps to take before we can safely resume worship. However, at this point, I have more questions than answers. I offer this pastoral letter as my best advice at this time. It's not the final word, though; it's what I think now. I have been wrong before. I will be wrong again. Maybe I'm wrong now. Please know that I am praying for you, I am praying for wisdom for myself and for all of us, and I strongly believe that God is still at work in all of this and that God will use all of this for God's glory.

Sincerely,

Ed Thompson

Ed Thompson
General Presbyter