

May 21, 2020

Dear Apostles Friends,

Pastor Narda, Secretary/Treasurer Linda and Consistory have been talking about re-opening the church for on-site worship when it is safe to do so. We know that we can't go back to the way things were in February – not in worship, nor in society. Things are going to change, but how? We've received excellent guidance from our Conference leadership and the Insurance Board, and we're making the decisions we need to make in order to keep people safe. The new normal as it pertains to on-site, in church worship is beginning to reveal itself. I've been given a peek behind the curtain, and I'm going to tell you what I saw.

Before we talk about what the Reopened Church will look like, we need to have a serious conversation about whether or not you should plan to join us. Although we look forward to gathering in worship again, we realize that attending worship in person may present too much of a risk for some of our members. Members who are ill and/or who have serious underlying health concerns should remain isolated. We will continue to provide "virtual church" for those members with computer capability and distribute our monthly newsletter by email and regular mail. The pastor and members of the church leadership will also telephone isolated members to keep in touch.

If you are healthy enough to rejoin us in worship, be assured of a warm welcome – a masked and social distanced warm welcome. Masking and social distancing will be the hallmarks of the Reopened Church. Put on your best Sunday-go-to-church mask when you're ready to get out of your vehicle, and leave it on until you climb back in your vehicle to go home. Disposable masks will be available at the door if you leave your favorite mask at home. You should also be cognizant of maintaining at least a 6 feet distance between yourself and other people who are not part of your household. It would even be a good idea to leave a space between your car and the cars on either side of you when you park, if possible.

When you enter the church you will have an almost overwhelming desire to stop, shake hands, hug, or have a close conversation with other members that you haven't seen for a long time. In other words, if left unchecked, your instincts will be to violate every social distancing rule in the book as soon as you get in the door. I know. I'm with you, but we must summon all our strength and resist that temptation. Instead of stopping and hugging, pause just long enough to get a squirt of anti-bacterial slime and head resolutely into the sanctuary. You need keep just two words in mind as you select your Reopened Church seat: spread out! You can sit right beside people who live in your house with you, but you must remain a good social distance (at least 6 feet) away from others. If you forget any of this (I can't imagine that you would) there will be plenty of signs and a few helpful ushers who will remind you. They're not being mean. They're just trying to keep everyone safe.

Look around when you get to your seat. What's missing? Pretty much everything: hymnals, bibles, special services and rites booklets, special offering envelopes, pencils. Anything that could harbor a fugitive corona virus is gone. Worship is going "no touch" wherever it is feasible and appropriate to do so. We'll follow the order of worship on the monitors. Having all that stuff out of the pews will make it easy for our cleaning contractor to disinfect the pews. And they will – every pew, every week. We are not going to pass the offering plate any more, but your offering is needed and appreciated now more than ever. The offering plates will still be doing their job. They will be hanging out at the exits instead of traveling around the sanctuary. Please give them some love on the way in or out. The pastor and the ushers will provide special instructions for communion.

When worship starts your mask will start challenging you like a spoiled teenager. It will make saying the responses difficult, singing almost impossible, and it will probably fog up your glasses for good measure. Look around, know that everyone is experiencing the same thing and that we are all in this together. Smile, even though no one can see you, and silently tell your mask that you're the boss and that it won't get the car keys until it learns how to behave in public. All of these tasks in masks will get easier the more we perform them.

The order of worship itself will be essentially the same but with a lot less singing. Just like in the pews, the focus for the people helping to conduct the service will be on maintaining a good social distance from each other. The pastor will be the only person using the pulpit. Scripture will be read by the pastor or by a lay member from his or her pew. We will still have a time for children and the young at heart, but individuals answering to either of those descriptions will remain in the pew instead of coming up to the front of the church.

You have one more important social distancing job, and it's probably the hardest one of all. When the pastor blesses and dismisses us, get your things and go, maintaining a good social distance on the way out. Folks on the left (West) side of the sanctuary as you face the altar will exit out of the sanctuary through the sliding doors and exit the church through the side doors past the pastor's office. Folks on the right (East, or window) side will exit out the back of the sanctuary and exit the church out the front doors. The ushers will gently remind you to have that socially distanced conversation on the grounds or in the parking lot, not in the building.

I ask you to consider these three final thoughts as we contemplate the new normal Reopened Church:

1. "This is your time, and it feels normal to you, but really there is no normal. There's only change, and resistance to change, and then more change." Meryl Streep

I tried to write this message in a humorous style because a sense of humor is a trait that is common among resilient people. Let's be resilient. Let's keep our sense of humor and smile

under our masks. People may not be able to see your upturned mouth, but your eyes will give your smile away. Your eyes will say, "It's all right. This is a big change, but change keeps on coming. We'll be fine."

2. "It's not love, but it's not bad." Merle Haggard

I loved the way we worshipped before the stay-at-home order, and I'm afraid maybe I'm not going to love worship in the Reopened Church – at least not at first. But it won't be bad, and it will be up to us to make it better. Some people consume a worship service like they would a television show. "I'm here. Entertain me." I see it a little differently. I think we are co-creators of the worship experience. Let's be fully present in the moment, despite the masks and social distancing. Let's take ownership of worship in the Reopened Church and work to make it the best it can be.

3. "Now you are the body of Christ, and individually you are members of it." 1 Corinthians 12:27

As part of the church we are part of the Body of Christ. A body is not something we go to. A body is something we are. Let's keep a proper perspective. Let's remember that the Reopened Church is not about masks, social distancing, viruses, disinfectants, and no touch communion. The Reopened Church is much more than the building with the big sign out front that says "church" that isn't empty on Sunday mornings anymore. The Reopened Church is about being part of the Body of Christ. Thanks be to God.

*Lord, thank you for the prospect of getting together again in our Reopened Church. We ask your protection and comfort for those whose health status will keep them at home on Sunday mornings. Please grant us resilience; grant us the ability to be fully present in worship and to take ownership of our worship experience; and grant us the perspective to see what is really important. Amen.*

Take care and God bless you all.

Bert