

THE PRESBYTERY OF BEAVER-BUTLER

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Greetings in Christ,

Many churches have found it necessary to conclude in-person worship in recent weeks. As we move from April into May the most pressing question that we hear is 'When can our congregation again gather for worship in our sanctuary?' As you are aware, Beaver-Butler Presbytery does not have the 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 we would 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, we cannot do that.

Our state government currently indicates that groups that gather should be quite small. That advice may change from one day to the next. And different regions of Beaver-Butler Presbytery may have different state mandated standards in this re-entry process. Yet even when some standards begin to ease, is it really safe to go back to doing worship the way we used to do it just yet? We do not think so. Anyway, here are some things we 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 soon begin to gather for worship. That needs to be a session decision. Will you proceed by a simple majority vote, only proceed if it is a 2/3 majority, or will you require an unanimous vote on this? Conversely, if you normally have more than 50 in worship do you move toward multiple worship services each week? Limit the number of people allowed to enter for worship? Some other alternatives?

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 is a session decision. Are you going to proceed if it is a simple majority, only proceed if it is a 2/3 majority, or will you require an 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 is an old saying, "a lick and a prayer" that could often be applied to church cleaning practices. That is not going to cut it anymore.

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

- Will you provide face masks for those who do not bring them?
- If people are not willing to wear face masks, will you ask them to leave? Who would tell them?
- How will you designate what pews to sit in? It has been suggested that people sit in every other pew.
- How will you collect the offering? It is probably wise to put the offering plates or a basket to receive offerings at each entrance to the sanctuary, so people do not 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 are not handling hymnbooks and pew Bibles. It may be wiser to put everything on screens.
- Will you sing hymns? It has been stated that germs can be spread 20 feet while singing. It is 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 is 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 do not 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 our biggest concern, though, comes when we 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? As many of you are aware, churches in Beaver-Butler Presbytery have experienced the painful reality of the death of church members due to COVID-19.

We could say we are taking a leap of faith in deciding to open our church. We think it is 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 will not survive, afraid our budget will be so severely compromised that we will have to cut staff, programs or mission giving.

We 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 us.

If your church wants to resume in-person worship (following medical and government guidelines), you have that right. We 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.

We are including three articles we 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. The final piece, "[Returning to Work and Services,](#)" comes from The Insurance Board. You may also want to check with your church's insurance agent to see what guidance they might offer.

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

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