



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (PCA)

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May 8, 2020

Dear Saints of God in Christ,

This week's pastoral letter will be a bit different from the recent letters.

Let me be direct and start with what I think will be received as good news: last night, Session - in conversation with the Chairman of the Diaconate - decided to resume public services of prayer and praise beginning May 17, 2020. Additionally, this Lord's Day (May 10, 2020), if you would like to come to observe the livestream please email the church to ensure there is adequate availability. Session has decided we can accommodate a couple dozen people in the auditorium starting May 10. Once again: please email the office if you are interested in coming on May 10: OFFICE@FPFO.org.

I. Not Back to Normal

Now for the difficult news: when we resume gathering, it will not be "back to normal," and it won't be - properly speaking - public worship, even though it will feature many of the elements of a worship service. The reason we cannot be back to normal is due to many factors.

First, many of our most dear saints will be unable to resume gathering along with us for many more weeks due to age, health conditions, and/or responsibility to others who are considered high risk for coronavirus complications. We will miss worshiping with them, we will miss the gifts they bring to the body, and we will continue to pray the Lord will remove this scourge from the land so we can again gather together. For this reason, *we will continue the livestream service for the foreseeable future.*

Second, our reopening on the Lord's Day mornings will be under quite restrictive conditions in order to comply with the Governor's Public Health Emergency Declaration. Some of the details required for any reopening are summarized below:

1. **Social distancing protocols must be observed.** This will be particularly difficult for our congregation, because we like each other! But nonetheless, we must strive to maintain at least six feet between households because this virus can be spread easily by those who have no symptoms. This will mean no handshaking and no hugs. Additionally, we'll need to avoid standing in hallways and doorways; instead, please go directly to the auditorium and be seated when you arrive. Likewise at the conclusion of the service, people will be dismissed by rows (like at a wedding or funeral) to go to their cars. We won't be able to stay and greet one another after the service is concluded.
2. **People over age 65 are still under a "stay-at-home" order.** This virus is especially deadly to our most senior saints, and the Governor issued a revised stay at home order on April 23 that extends the time certain people must remain at home. If you are over age 65, Session encourages and advises you to consider worshiping with your family in your home via the livestream.
3. **People with health complications are still under a "stay-at-home" order.** Regardless of age, other health factors make the coronavirus particularly deadly to certain types of people. For example, people with diabetes seem to be at extraordinarily high risk of death associated with coronavirus. Likewise, those who suffer from lung disease, asthma, heart disease, a compromised immune system, or are obese are likewise still under a stay at home order from the Governor.
4. **Session strongly encourages the use of face coverings.** The primary way in which this virus is spread to others is through water vapor droplets (i.e. spittle!) that escape from your mouth or nose. This happens even more when you speak or sing. For that reason, Session requests you wear a mask of some sort, which is especially needed when we sing together. And if you wear it the whole time, it would ensure greater safety for all the congregants.

5. **Bathroom access will be limited.** For obvious reasons, bathrooms are places where the virus can spread quite easily. For this reason, please do not plan to use the bathroom while here. This will be especially difficult for the younger ones (and maybe older ones too!), and that is a reason you may want to continue worshiping as a family via the livestream at home.
6. **Nursery and childcare will *not* be provided.** It's simply impossible to maintain social distancing between households when caring for the children of someone else. Under normal circumstances, children of every age are always welcome in every part of public worship. Likewise, children are most welcome to observe the livestream. But because of health concerns, we simply can't offer a nursery just yet. In fact, CBS News recently reported that the vast majority of children in families with coronavirus exhibited little or no symptoms, yet are able to spread the virus like any of us.
7. **Hymnals will not be used.** Because of the particular risks associated with singing and touch, we'll have individual bulletins printed and placed in the pews for people to use during the service.

Third, many of you won't be comfortable coming back just yet, and that is just fine. The virus remains a threat. If you agree the best way to steward your own life and the lives of others is by staying home, please continue to worship with your family and use the livestream as an aid to that. Session does not want to encourage anyone to return to public gatherings prior to the lifting of advisories against public gatherings.

Fourth, the final reason I want to consider for why we can't return to normal is simply this: we're not living in "normal" times. Coronavirus and the additional health safety measures we need to take are always in the back of our minds, which will continue to be the case for quite some time.

II. Continued Prayerful Vigilance

As I write this, I kind of feel like what I imagine my junior high assistant principal may have felt like as he issued decrees to govern the conduct of us young scholars at the school. I apologize if this sounds heavy-handed; that's not my intention.

As we move toward an increasing level of openness, Session is going to continue monitoring the situation and remain in contact with local health authorities. We must take great care to avoid an outbreak here, and if the levels and/or rates of infections in Northwest Georgia seem to be spiking, we may have to return to more restricted operations.

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. Romans 11:33-36

It is our prayer that we will soon be able to all gather again for public worship. But until then we will trust God and seek to live faithfully in light of His providential governing of all His creatures and all their actions. Trusting in God's providence, just as faith in Christ, does not mean idleness or carelessness toward health and temporal matters. Instead, it motivates us to greater diligence because we know Him who sits on the throne is good and reasonable.

This has been a great challenge for your elders; please contact me if you have questions about our plans. We are trying to balance the need to praise God and desires of those who are ready to resume gathering with the need to practice wisdom in all activities in which one comes into contact with other people. So please prayerfully consider whether you will join us in person or continue worshiping with your family at home using the livestream as an aid to that family worship.

Your friend,



Ryan Biese,
Pastor