**CORONAVIRUS UPDATE – May 11, 2020**

**Reopening Church?**

Last week, I wrote that in Florida’s Phase 1 reopening plan, there was no update on guidance regarding churches, which had been that churches are essential businesses but need to follow CFC guidelines to limit gatherings to ten people or less. After that article was published, a pastor contacted me to note that Seminole County was allowing churches to operate at 50% of their listed capacity.

Apparently, guidelines can vary according to counties, and Central Florida Pr4esbytery encompasses ten counties. I have not heard of advice coming from other counties in the Presbytery, but Orange County has scheduled a virtual town hall meeting for Thursday, May 14, 2020 from 2:00 pm to 3:00 pm on “Reopening Houses of Worship: Diverse Conversations & Perspectives,” with the Inter-Faith Council and the Central Florida Commission for Religious Freedom participating (registration required). Please let me know of changes in your county should this have happened recently.

The decision to resume in-person worship is a session responsibility (G-3.0201a). This decision should be made understanding the risks of the COVID-19 epidemic and how these relate to the members of our congregations. One-third of the active members of the churches of CFP are 65 or older. As I have noted previously, our members are likely to approach this decision not just from the perspective of what civil authorities are now permitting, but also as to whether they feel that it is safe for them to resume attending. People will reach different conclusions on this, so sessions should continue online worship while in-person worship is resumed.

We have posted several articles that outline questions sessions need to answer as they consider moving back to in-person worship on Presbytery’s [COVID-19 Resources page](http://www.cfpresbytery.org/resources-for-a-time-of-pandemic.html). Several articles have crossed my desk over the past few days that pastors and sessions ought to consider. Two have been produced by the Theology, Formation and Evangelism area of the Presbyterian Mission Agency on reopening for worship:

* [Beginning Conversations for Re-Entry](https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/covid-19/beginning-conversations-for-re-entry.pdf) is a one-page article that frames the basic issues that need to be considered before resuming in-person worship (see below).
* [Returning to Public Worship: Theological and Practical Considerations](https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/covid-19/returning_to_public_worship_may_2020.pdf) is a 20-page document that places many of the questions that ought to be answered and issues that need to be addressed for resuming in-person worship within a Reformed theological and polity framework. This information is similar to the articles by Ken Braddy and the Wisconsin Council of Churches.

The first article, above, includes six bullet points for sessions to consider as foundational for making decisions on resuming in-person worship:

* Gather leadership that is representative of the entire church and church activities (worship, education, youth gatherings, summer programs, building support staff etc.) All should come to the table together for these discussions.
* There are many guides, suggestions and opinion articles out there. You may be gathering these materials for your leadership to consider. Remember the unique characteristics of your community—both geographically and your practices. Some information from across the country may or may not be helpful. Have leadership read and discern ahead of your meetings. Make sure to have all the facts for your city, county and state on-hand.
* Allow time and space for lament and fears to be named. Recognize that your people will come with their own situations and viewpoints. Needs for pastoral care may arise that weren’t previously known. The world and certainly the church are entering unchartered territory and things will not return to “normal.” Recognize that this change may bring grief.
* This is the time to tap into strategic leaders in your community as well as strong pastoral leadership. Do you need to reach out for more resources? A coach? A Presbytery leader? Someone in your faith community that offers certain gifts?
* Consider developing phases of re-entry for your community that last weeks or months before moving to the next phase. Make sure you have a process in place for determining when to go to the next phase or take a few steps back. Communicate that plans may need to change depending on the health of the community.
* We are a connectional Church. Remind leaders that mid-councils, synods and the national body offers guidelines and suggestions but not typically mandates. Empower your leaders to make decisions for your church but to reach out for support and connection with others especially mid-council leadership. Make sure all health guidelines and orders of local governments are being followed.

Here are several additional suggestions as your session has this conversation:

1. When you develop a plan for resuming in-person worship, contact your insurance provider to see whether they have any suggestions or concerns that ought to be addressed.
2. Make sure to develop a Plan B should infections increase within your community or congregation.
3. Continue to encourage people who do not feel well to stay home and not attend events. Consider screening people as they arrive for worship.
4. Continue to be sensitive to the pastoral needs of older members, particularly those who are not in the online world, and who will not be present in person for some time to come.

I read an additional article this morning that casts the risks of activities like in-person worship in a way that is both understandable and sobering. [The Risks – Know Them – Avoid Them](https://www.erinbromage.com/post/the-risks-know-them-avoid-them) is written by Dr. Erin Bromage, Associate Professor of Biology at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. Dr. Bromage’s research focuses on the evolution of the immune system and the immunological mechanisms responsible for protection from infectious disease. His article notes that many infections occurred in indoor spaces with poor circulation of air (or air circulated by HVAC systems) such as in workplaces, restaurants, and religious activities. Transmission of the virus primarily occurs from being in proximity to an infectious person breathing, coughing, or sneezing and spreading droplets into the air, which can quickly spread across a room. Cleaning protocols, limiting items handled by several people (hymnals, offering plates, communion ware), hand-washing and sanitizing, wearing masks, and other steps are important, but they may not prevent the impact that one asymptomatic but infectious individual attending a one-hour worship service or other activities can have. The choir rehearsal at a Presbyterian Church in Washington State was an early example of this.

These will not be easy decisions for your session to make, and perhaps will be the most significant decisions to be made for quite some time to come. One task of the Presbytery is to provide resources so sessions can more readily be the decision-making bodies they are designed to be. As always, if you have questions or concerns, please be in touch with us. And, as was requested in an email on Friday, as you make decisions on worship, please inform Cheryl Carson of any changes so she can update the information on our web site:

* Church Name
* Name, email and phone of a church contact
* A target date to return to face-to-face worship, if you have one
* Worship times or when the service is published for viewing
* How/where you are holding virtual worship (ex. Zoom, Facebook Live, YouTube, church website) along with the **link** where people can find your worship (or who to contact to get zoom info)

**Church Growth**

Thanks to Carmelo Mercado for a heads up on this article: [“Half of All Churches Are Instantly Growing. Here’s Why and Here’s What to Do,”](https://careynieuwhof.com/half-of-all-churches-are-instantly-growing-heres-why-and-heres-what-to-do/) by Carey Nieuwhof. As your congregation continues to do ministry virtually, what have you noticed? Feel free to send an email with what you are seeing.

**COVID-19 Legislation Guide**

The General Assembly has produced an eleven-page document that provides an overview of the legislation passed recently to address the COVID-19 pandemic, [COVID-19 RELATED LEGISLATION OVERVIEW, A Guide for Presbyterian Churches and Ministries.](http://www.presbyterianfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-legislation-guide-for-PCUSA-srb.pdf) (Thanks again, Carmelo!)

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