

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church

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Rev. Stacy Lauer-Scovanner, Pastor

May 25, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

I wanted to write and tell you about what we have been discussing in our return to in-person worship services. This will be a long read, and I'll make no apologies for that – but I do encourage you to prayerfully consider yourself, our Pastor, our congregation, the ELCA and the world at large.

Members of the team discussed ideas and concerns for finding the most effective and safe possibilities for future worship at St. John's.

First and foremost, the team wants to know what the congregation feels about future services at St. John's. We will send a survey to our members using Survey Monkey online and a mailed survey to those who do not have access to the Internet.

We will continue the use of Zoom for church services and other meetings happening daily and weekly for interested members.

Ron Zorn reported that he has talked with our insurance carrier to find out what requirements they would have if we should reopen our building. He has also purchased and is awaiting delivery of PPE to be used at future church services.

Sandy has talked with Barry Laird about purchasing a transmitter and microphone to be used for parking lot services. She just received 250 individual communion kits.

St. John's Lutheran Groton has offered the use of their sanctuary for possible church services. We would be responsible for cleaning and disinfecting before and after the services.

What the ELCA is telling us:

As ELCA congregations face difficult decisions regarding when and how they will be able to gather again for worship, this resource offers general guidance. Please note that this is not a comprehensive, one-size-fits-all resource; it will need to be interpreted and adapted for your local context. In many, if not most contexts, it will not be safe or advisable to gather for in-person worship for some time. National, state, and local medical and legal guidelines will need to be consulted and followed. While risk is not avoidable, this guidance is presented with the aim of reducing the level of risk for your community. Your pastor and congregational leaders will want to carefully consider:

- legally binding orders
- the safety of the community and congregation

- recommendations from health officials
- recommendations from your synod office
- insurer loss-control recommendations and your insurance policy
- following state guidelines and federal guidelines for a three-phased approach to opening.

Of note are the criteria for moving from strict physical distancing (Phase 1) to a staged reopening (Phase 2) to being OPEN (Phase 3):

Be mindful that the “staged” or “phased” approach presented in several resources will likely not be a linear one; there may be times of gradual reopening as infections decrease, followed by restrictions if new waves of infections emerge.

In all situations, you will want to err on the side of love for your neighbor and know that change will be inevitable. Patience, grace, and flexibility will be necessary as you strive to make the most appropriate decisions for the people of God in your place at this time. In addition to worship planning, it will be helpful to spend time reflecting upon on what you have done online or in-person, as this time will likely lead to new insights and discoveries for your worshiping community.

NOTE: To me - It would seem Ohio is in or progressing to a Phase 2 Re-opening, the following are recommended Best Practices for Phase 2:

Church activities restricted to 50 people or fewer (Federal Guideline Phase 2):

- Consider whether in-person worship is or is not advisable in your context (under 65, no underlying conditions).
- Institute increased sanitation/cleaning and hygiene measures at church.
- Congregations with greater than 50 average worship attendance might want to consider additional services with cleaning occurring between services. Consider other small-group options as well.
- Maintain physical distancing in worship (at least six feet, excluding households). If the worship space has pews, limit one family unit per pew; keep empty pews between families.
- Close common areas (fellowship halls, church offices, coffee spaces).
- Refrain from communion, handshakes, passing offering plates, and handing out printed bulletins.
- Worshipers wear masks at all times.
- Consider other in-person leadership if leaders are over 65 or have underlying conditions that put them at risk.

As our sanctuary is small additional restrictions will most likely also include:

No singing, no response, no wind instruments as:

- Singing together, even from a distance, is one of the riskiest behaviors due to the spread of aerosol and droplets that can carry the virus a significant distance and remain suspended in the air. A cloth mask is unlikely to protect you or your neighbor.
- Similar caution applies to unison speaking, such as reciting the Lord’s Prayer and other communal speech.

- Like singing, playing a wind instrument initiates a spread of aerosol and droplets and poses a strong risk of infection.

NOTE: Persons age 65+ are still recommended to Stay at Home if Possible

Phase 3, we are not here yet, but when we are here are the best practices:

Church activities open for more than 50 people (Federal Guideline Phase 3):

- Maintain increased sanitation/cleaning and hygiene measures at church.
- Resume in-person worship with other members (insofar as they feel comfortable doing so).
- Continue online worship for those who still cannot gather.
- Resume communion, etc., with additional precautionary measures.
- Physical distancing may be relaxed and masks may become optional in some places based on various factors and recommendations from officials.

You may be asking yourself, as I am, at this point - what is our way forward?

Yes, we have some obstacles to overcome some critical and others less so. The safety of the community and congregation; recommendations from health officials and synod office; our insurance policy and following state guidelines and federal guidelines for a three-phased approach to opening.

We need to do what is right, most legal orders do not apply to our religious institution, but that doesn't mean we should just fling open the doors and return to our prior in-person worship services. We, I think, are morally and ethically bound to follow the best practices, at least that are outlined above.

We will continue to use Zoom and will work toward getting higher participation; we are moving toward a Parking Lot service (you would stay in your vehicle) and will see if Groton's offer is feasible as they have quite a larger area to allow physical distancing.

Attached or enclosed you will find a survey, we expect and welcome your input, please every confirmed member should complete this. You may email your completed survey to Kyle Young; (who will compile the responses) at SJLCUC@gmail.com or mail to our church..

If you want to contact me – please do; my cell is 419.624.2422 (I don't often answer unknown calls – so, please leave me a message) or email me at kryoung4196242422@gmail.com.

The COVID-19 crisis will not last forever, but it will be with us for the foreseeable future. Until public health authorities say the coast is clear, we need to remain cautious, diligent and wise to keep God's people safe. *May God bless and keep you, may God's face shine upon you with grace and mercy. May God look upon you with favor and give you peace, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

Go in peace. Stay healthy!

Kevin Young
Congregational Council, President

“A Family of Disciples Faithfully Making Christ Known”