

June 16, 2020

"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends,"

John 15:13

"We sacrifice for the common good to show our love in action."

Dear Friends –

A lot has happened since we last wrote 3 weeks ago.

And a lot has not happened since we last wrote 3 weeks ago.

What has not happened?

We have not changed our recommendation - ***that our church buildings remain closed and worship remain virtual until at least September 12.***

Some have asked what is magic about September 12 other than a very likely virtual Presbytery meeting.

At the end of April, Infectious disease expert Michael Osterholm, in an interview with CNN, is quoted as saying, "we're only in the second inning of a nine-inning contest, with the possibility of as many as 800,000 deaths or more in the US over the next 18 months."

If we were only in the second inning at the end of April, we probably aren't past the third inning now. The virus is still active. And it is still deadly. The number of COVID-19 cases has seen an uptick in states that have begun to relax their rules. And all eyes are on the countries in Southern Hemisphere as they move into Fall and Winter – a time when it is expected there will be another wave here in the US.

If...and that is a big if...buildings are able to reopen in September, you will need these Summer months to come up with a plan. Churches in the City of Newark have to file an application with the City in order to reopen. The Presbytery is asking that ALL churches submit a plan of reopening. To that end, our friends in neighboring Newton Presbytery have put together guidelines and a checklist that we – and others of our New Jersey neighbors – are adopting. All of these documents can be found at <https://newarkpresbytery.org/building-re-opening/>.

What has happened?

Governor Murphy spoke and released guidelines that would allow houses of worship to reopen their church buildings at 25% of capacity, or no greater than 50 people. But he also said something else - "I fully appreciate that there are faith leaders who do not yet feel comfortable reopening their sanctuaries at this time. There is no requirement that they do so. No one should reopen unless, and until, they feel fully confident in their ability to do so."

It is the unwavering opinion of your Presbytery's Building Re-Opening Task Force - just because you can doesn't mean you should. The Task Force hosted two Question and Answer zoom calls last week. Many thanks to all who attended. We recognize this is an emotional topic. We recognize that many don't want to be told they shouldn't. And we recognize that you miss being together. Under normal circumstances, we're better together than separate. During this pandemic, we are better together **while** separate.

Let's think of it this way...who among you wants to be the headline story: "The Presbyterian Church in (fill in your town) has been gathering for in person worship...# infected...# dead." Friends, when we make these

recommendations, we do so NOT out of fear. We are three Elders, and three Ministers of the Word and Sacrament. We are people of faith. We have taken ordination vows to serve with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. And we believe – without a doubt - in the power of God. But we also believe in the wisdom of sound counsel given to those who have God given gifts.

This is not the time to consider our own rights – to return to in-person worship no matter what. Even if you go back to your buildings tomorrow, there are more things you shouldn't do than should. You shouldn't sing. You shouldn't do responsive or unison readings. You shouldn't pick up a hymnal or a Bible. You shouldn't pass the peace. You shouldn't hug one another. You shouldn't greet your pastor at the door. And you shouldn't stay for coffee hour. If there's any outside air moving, you shouldn't open your windows or leave your doors open for ventilation. And if you have air conditioning, you shouldn't use it without appropriate HEPA filters. You shouldn't be any closer to one another than six feet. You shouldn't enter the building at all without a mask. And if you still decide to come together, you must become hypervigilant about cleaning high-touch surfaces to prevent the spread of the virus by people touching common objects and surfaces.

This is, however, the time to think about what exercising your rights – no matter what – means to others. The minute church buildings reopen, the first people to show up will likely be the ones that are at greatest risk – those with underlying health issues and those over 60 – and that will probably include your pastoral leader as well.

We continue to hold you and yours in our prayers, even as God holds each one of us – each God's beloved – in God's own hand.

Faithfully,

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Transitional Director of Presbytery Ministries

Elder Warren C. McNeill
Stated Clerk

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Elder Carlos Monteagudo, MD, MPH
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