

August 6, 2020

Dear Friends –

“The Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other.”
Genesis 31:49

Your Building Re-Opening Task Force met Wednesday, August 5 by Zoom. We had hard conversation. We used phrases such as “eye of the storm,” and “unmitigated disaster.” We talked about safety. We talked about economics. So in light of where we are as a nation, and taking into account the reality of increasing infections, the Task Force recommends that the church buildings of Newark Presbytery remain closed to in-person worship and any other indoor gatherings until January 2021. Our hope is that this recommendation and the rationale will be helpful as sessions have conversations.

Why?

On Tuesday, August 4 Governor Murphy “tightened restrictions on indoor gatherings Monday after raising the alarm over signs of growing spread of the coronavirus in the state.” While he rolled the allowable indoor limit back to 25 people, socially distant and masked, he went on to say weddings, funerals, religious and political events were exempt. We are perplexed at this caveat.

Examples of why we – as the Task Force - made the decision we did -

- ❖ The Executive Presbyter of Great Rivers in Illinois wrote on social media – “Sharing in partnership with our first COVID-19 infected church so that other congregations know to not let your guard down in the face of this pandemic.”

“Even after making careful protocols to permit safe worship, after meeting weekly for about a month, members became accustomed to seeing each, and mask-wearing became less and less common. With our smaller church, we let our guard down,” shares the Clerk of Session. She further explained, “the church was sanitized before every gathering, they were practicing social distancing in worship by placing bulletins ahead of time in pre-arranged seating, not passing the offering plate, had hand sanitizer at the back of the church and Clorox wipes in the restroom for people to clean surfaces, and they also had not had communion since early March. However, they couldn’t resist singing, and after they had begun seeing each other, they began to lower their masks. We are a very tightknit church. We trust each other because we know each other. Part of that familiarity prevented some from feeling the urgency for the sustained need for wearing masks.”

- ❖ From news sources: A second-grade student in Georgia tested positive for the coronavirus after attending the first day of school, leading the district to ask 20 other students and a teacher to self-quarantine for two weeks.
- ❖ From one of Barbara and Warren’s mid-council colleagues: “Our best guess is [my wife] contracted it at work, which is taking every precaution advised by public health officials. So that’s the lesson: Even in that environment, transmission is possible. Please do not be lulled into a false sense of security. Particularly church folk: This is not a game to be played.”

It is our opinion that unless and until the public health crisis among us is addressed, we will continue to experience economic challenge. We understand our churches are experiencing hardship at lost rental revenue and decreased giving from members and friends. To that end, there have been conversations among Presbytery leadership about offering grants to churches which we expect to be able to share with you in the coming days.



We have all heard stories. They range from people with mild symptoms and recovery, to ventilators and death. Some people have mercifully remained healthy. It is our hope that by remaining vigilant and continuing virtual worship at least through the end of this calendar year, that we in Newark Presbytery will not add to the rising numbers of illness and death. We also feel strongly that things are going to get worse and we will see another wave of this virus. This pandemic is real. And it would be a travesty if our reopening were to lead to the serious illness or death of our congregants.

As we did some months ago, we will hold two Zoom Q&A gatherings. The first will be held on Monday, August 24 at 7:00 p.m. and the second will be held on Thursday, August 27 at 7:00 p.m. Please email Barbara Smith at revdocbsmith@gmail.com and let her know which date, or both, you would like to attend. The Zoom invitations will be sent the morning of each gathering.

We grieve as do all of you. We want to be on the other side of this wilderness. But the only way out is through. And we are still in the middle of the unknown. But we remain confident of God's presence with us – watching between us while we are physically separated.

Faithfully,

Rev. Dr. Barbara A. Smith
Transitional Director of Presbytery Ministries

Elder Warren C. McNeill
Stated Clerk

Rev. Maria Crompton
Elmwood United Presbyterian Church

Elder Carlos Monteagudo, MD, MPH
Bloomfield Church on the Green

Rev. Dan Martian
Presbyterian Church of Livingston

Elder Tia Goss Sawhney, DrPH, FSA, MAAA
First Presbyterian Church Newark