



Presbytery of Lake Michigan

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

June 8, 2020

Presbytery of Lake Michigan
Clerks of Session
Pastors with congregations

Siblings in Christ Jesus,

Grace to you and peace.

Our congregations and faith communities are active and alive. The expressions of our faith could not be contained within the walls of church buildings. This is evidenced by the new ways we have discovered to worship and to minister to our communities and each other during the last four months. Most congregations are connecting electronically with many more persons each Sunday than were coming to worship in their buildings. Youth and Bible study ministries are also thriving. Most of our congregations have experienced financial support from a broader base of participants than has been true in the last few years. Our involvement in meeting community needs has shown creativity and innovation. We are grateful to God for all the ways the congregations within our presbytery have been blessed.

Still, something is missing. We long to be with each other. We miss gathering in person for the Lord's Supper, hugging and handshaking, singing together in person, sitting in our familiar pew, gathering for refreshments before or after the service. Many of our congregations are asking, "When can we worship in our church building?"

The Presbytery's Leadership Team spent some time in discernment and discussion about this question at its June 4, 2020 meeting. The Leadership Team instructed us to write a pastoral letter reflecting the wisdom and insights shared during the meeting.

There is a wealth of data from a wide variety of sources. Much of the data is consistent between sources, some of the information reflects different perspectives. As we all work to find our way forward, here are suggestions of things to consider:

A. Our evolving knowledge

The medical community continues to learn more and more about the transmission and susceptibility to contracting the virus. There appears to be agreement on the need for social distancing (at least 6 feet), and agreement that the aerosol effect of singing (and laughing) increases the risk of spread for many others. The use of a mask is to protect others from the mask-wearer, but the data is not

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complete on the efficacy of different kinds of masks. However, even as we have learned much during the last few months, there is still much that is unknown about this virus.

B. Political perspectives influence responses to the pandemic

Representatives of both major political parties have attempted to use the pandemic crisis to advance their own agendas. We recognize a wide diversity of political opinion and involvement within our presbytery. Church members are encouraged to be active in government, but the church's concerns and response to the current situation transcends political considerations.

C. Relationship between permission and wisdom

A congregation's freedom to worship in a building, whether based on changes in regulations or an assertion of religious freedom, does not mean that gathering in person in a building is a wise or loving and faithful thing to do. Freedom means the ability to choose among options.

D. The Church is called to protect those most vulnerable

Many attendees of our congregations are identified as part of the vulnerable populations. What is the most loving thing we can do for these persons? While some of us may feel healthy and are ready to tolerate the risks, the choices of those in positions of leadership must always consider what is good for all the members, and especially the most vulnerable.

E. Risks involved in opening the building

Some Presbyterian congregations have discovered that their insurance carrier would not cover them for liability if they are not able to demonstrate strict adherence to all official guidelines and regulations. Of course, this may vary by insurance carrier. Some insurance carriers have issued guidelines regarding protocols to be followed when the church buildings are opened for various functions. We again call attention to the need for detailed consideration of sanitation protocols, especially as they pertain to use of restrooms and other confined areas exposed to use by multiple persons. If someone who used the building contracted and died from COVID-19, the congregation could be at risk if the heirs of the deceased learned that the congregation failed to rigorously follow recommended protocols.

F. Variety of circumstances

Congregations may need to establish different protocols for how the staff members use the building, how smaller groups from within the congregation use the building, how community groups use the building, and how the building is used for worship services.

G. Accommodations for those not ready to gather

A congregation may decide about its building use for a variety of functions. Likely not everyone will share the same level of comfort in coming to the building. Room must be given for individual judgment on this matter and care taken not to shame or coerce persons who make their own choices on this matter. This is especially true as relates to a decision regarding in person worship within the building. Furthermore, if the pastor or staff member chooses not to be present out of concern for

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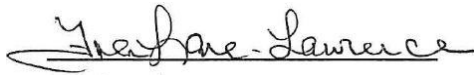
her/his health, there should be no repercussions or pressure exerted during this crisis. Pastors and Sessions who face this matter are encouraged to speak with their Commission on Ministry Liaison.

H. Possible flexibility during outdoor worship during summer

The summer allows some flexibility for possible worship gatherings in parking lots or parks or some other creative options. In each case, the guidelines regarding social distancing and other methods of retarding the spread of COVID-19 should be observed.

After the Leadership Team spent time in discernment and discussion, the recommendation is that the congregations of the Presbytery of Lake Michigan not conduct in-person worship services within their church buildings until at least September 13, 2020.

God Bless,



Fran Lane-Lawrence
Transitional Co-Leader/Stated Clerk



Cal Bremer
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