

Presbytery of Lake Michigan

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

August 11, 2020

Presbytery of Lake Michigan
Clerks of Session
Pastors with congregations
Church Administrators

Dear Siblings in Christ:

In Psalm 84, the psalmist writes about the joy of worship in the temple.

*How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!
My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.*

*Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of hosts,
my King and my God. Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise. Selah*

The Leadership Team, at its meeting on August 6, 2020, decided it was best for the health and well-being of the members of the Presbytery of Lake Michigan to recommend that congregations not worship in person within their buildings prior to December 31, 2020. As December 31, 2020 approaches, the Leadership Team will once again evaluate the safety of worshipping in person within church buildings and make further recommendations.

This is a communication we did not want to write, and probably one pastors and sessions did not want to receive. One of the things for which our hearts long most during this season of pandemic is to worship in person in our church sanctuaries. We miss sitting with others in the Body of Christ raising our voices in praise and prayer to the God we love. Many miss the sound of quiet in the sanctuary before the service begins, the buzz of those excited to greet one another they arrive for worship, and the musical prelude calling us to a time of worship. There are so many things we miss about worshipping in person.

We also realize the anxieties many are having about the effects of suspending in person worship: the prolonged isolation of homebound and sick members; fear or experiences of declines in membership; fear of decreases in levels of giving; struggles to do ministry and mission within our communities; and the struggle to do virtual worship, just to name a few.

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We have every confidence in God's steadfast faithfulness to us during this difficult time. We are confident that God is able to give us the energy and creativity to continue to worship and do ministry in ways that proclaim the Gospel of Christ in bold new ways. We are confident that the Holy Spirit abides with us in every moment encouraging us as we seek to be beacons of hope that provide stability to our communities. We also have confidence in the gifts and talents of the teaching and ruling elders, and in their care and affection for those in the congregations they serve.

We realize that many sessions have already made the decision not to worship in person within their buildings for the remainder of 2020. We know also that some congregations are meeting in person outdoors on church properties. While the presbytery's recommendation is that congregations not meet in person within church buildings, some sessions have made the decision to resume in-person worship within their church buildings. Our utmost concern is for the safety and well-being of the members of the congregations that are part of the Presbytery of Lake Michigan.

For those who have resumed in-person worship within their church building, we urge them to use every precaution and to following safety protocols diligently so that no members will become infected with COVID-19. We also urge sessions to consider the following:

- All the "hot spots" in Michigan, except for the Detroit area, are within the bounds of the Presbytery of Lake Michigan. While many members of our congregations may live where the number of COVID cases is not high, many work and travel in more populated areas. As Michigan schools and businesses open and we move into the winter months, we anticipate an increase in the number of COVID cases.
- Currently, cases of the COVID-19 virus in Michigan are consistently high and we have not, since the beginning of the pandemic, had 14 consecutive days in which the number of COVID cases has declined.
- The nature of in-person worship within church buildings is a high-risk activity. (It is compared with going to a bar). People are spending a lengthy period in the same space with a lot of other people. Air circulation within sanctuaries could help to facilitate spread of the virus under those circumstances. Further, many of the activities that normally take place during in-person worship – hugging, handshakes, singing, coffee/fellowship hour – are all activities which facilitate the spread of the COVID virus and should be avoided.
- Of special note are the dangers associated with singing, whether it is congregational, praise teams or "special music." The aerosol effect of singing or loud public speaking (preaching) creates significant risk.
- Many people are not good at or refuse to comply with safety precautions – social distancing and the wearing of masks. We want to protect vulnerable members from those who are not disciplined in their protective behaviors.
- Many of the members of congregations are also members of the most vulnerable populations. The effect of inviting in-person worship within the building knowing there is a solid segment of the congregation that is not able to attend further separates the congregations, or sets up the scenario in which members think because the church is open, it is safe to attend.
- There are a number of safety and cleaning protocols that sessions need to keep in mind: Where within the sanctuary are people going to sit to appropriately social distance? How many people can the sanctuary hold while social distancing is practiced? What measures will be implemented to ensure social distancing? How is the congregation going to handle it when that

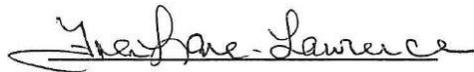
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next person who exceeds the restricted capacity arrives? What are the protocols for cleaning and sanitizing the sanctuary before and after worship? How many people can visit the restroom at a time? What cleaning and sanitizing protocols will be put in place? Who will do that cleaning and sanitizing? How many people will gather in the chancel area? Is the preacher going to preach in a mask? These are just some of the very important questions that need to be considered.

- We continue to encourage churches to fully examine the opportunities that exist for outdoor or open-air worship prior to making precipitous moves toward in-building worship, especially during the summer and fall.
- We also want to alert pastors and sessions to the need to respect pastors who may be part of the vulnerable population and choose not to participate; encouraging both pastors and sessions to be in contact with the Commission on Ministry if faced with that choice.
- While many insurance companies did not initially have any requirements of churches prior to the return to in-person/in building worship, many have begun to require waivers related to COVID-19. Sessions should check with their insurance companies regularly to make sure the requirements remain the same.

Friends in Christ, we know that the longer the difficult situation with COVID-19 is prolonged, the more anxiety provoking ministry becomes. Though this is new to us, leaning on Christ to lead us through difficult situations is not new to us. Being the Church no matter what comes our way is not new. Please know that we will continue to support you in every way we are able. Thank you for your faithfulness and perseverance.

Peace in Christ,



Fran Lane-Lawrence
Transitional Co-Leader/Stated Clerk



Cal Bremer
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