

Presbytery of Lake Michigan

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

July 30, 2020

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

Dear Siblings in Christ Jesus,

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We pray that you, your families and your congregations are staying well and safe during this difficult period of time of pandemic. We are aware of a few congregations that are worshiping in person outside of their buildings, while a very few are worshiping in person within their church buildings. In each case, we are working diligently to make sure that appropriate safety protocols have been established and that there are solid plans to assure that everyone attending in-person worship, in whatever form, complies with the established safety protocols. We have also been in touch with many other congregational leaders who are anxious to resume in-person worship services either inside or outside of church buildings. Our purpose in writing is to make a clear statement of what is recommended by the Presbytery of Lake Michigan and to convey expectations of those congregations who decide to resume in-person worship.

Worship is a fundamental privilege, duty, and expectation for Presbyterians. “Worship of the Triune God is at the center of our common life and our primary way of witness to the faith, hope, and love we have in Jesus Christ.” (Book of Order, W-1.0107) These expectations in this letter address “how” to worship in these unusual times. The “how” of worship has been influenced throughout the church’s history by multiple factors. In these days, the “how” of worship is impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the level of infection within our communities at particular times.

Each day, the office of Governor Gretchen Whitmer sends an update relevant to the number of COVID-19 infections by county within the State of Michigan along with Executive Orders and safety precautions put in place in response to those numbers. **The Presbytery of Lake Michigan expects that pastors and sessions will comply with orders, mandates and precautions set forth by the State of Michigan. The Presbytery of Lake Michigan also expects that decisions related to in-person worship will take into account the current recommendations of the CDC and medical experts.**

Currently, the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 is increasing daily. Yesterday, the number of confirmed cases was 996. Many of the areas experiencing spikes in COVID-19 cases are within the bounds of the Presbytery of Lake Michigan. Today, Governor Whitmer amended Michigan’s Safe

Start Order and issued revised workplace safeguards. Under the statewide Safe Start Order starting July 31, 2020, indoor gatherings will be limited to 10 people. The number of people that are allowed to gather outdoors is 100. (In region 6, 250 people are able to gather outdoors.) These executive orders include regions 2, 3 5, 6 and 7, which are all located within the bounds of the Presbytery of Lake Michigan. **It is our expectation that congregations will adhere to these new guidelines.**

The Presbytery of Lake Michigan continues to recommend that there be no in-person worship within church buildings prior to September 13, 2020. In-person worship can occur in outdoor locations like parking lots or church lawns as long as current governmental guidelines and recommended safety protocols are followed. Some items for Session to consider when discerning when, or if, to open the building for worship and what safety protocols to put in place OR, if a congregation is already holding in-person worship in the building, when to move worship outside or online:

- Sessions should not consider returning to in-person worship until Michigan has experienced at least 14 consecutive days in which the number of COVID cases has declined.
- Session should move any in-person worship occurring within their buildings to outside locations or online if state government lowers the mandate for the number of people who can gather to 10 or less.
- Many of the activities that take place during in-person worship – hugging, handshakes, singing, coffee/fellowship hour - should not occur as they are all activities which facilitate the spread of the virus.
- 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, such as preaching, creates significant risks.
- Many people are not good at or refuse to comply with safety precautions like social distancing and the wearing of masks. We want to protect the vulnerable from those who are not disciplined in their protective behaviors.
- Attending in-person worship within the building is considered a very 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 and the air circulation within sanctuaries could help to facilitate spread of the virus under those circumstances.
- Many congregation members also are members of the most vulnerable populations. The effect of inviting in-person worship within the building knowing there is a solid segment of the population 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.
- 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? Say, for instance, the number of people who can safely gather with appropriate social distancing is 150. How is the congregation going to handle it when that 151st person 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 before and after a person has visited the bathroom? 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? – You get where we are going.

July 30, 2020 – Reaffirm Delayed Reopening

- Sessions should examine fully what opportunities might exist for outdoor or open-air worship prior to making precipitous moves toward in-building worship.
- Sessions need to respect pastors who may be part of the vulnerable population and choose not to participate; if a session chooses to worship in-person and their pastor is not comfortable doing so, the pastor will not be compelled to participate and there will be no repercussions.

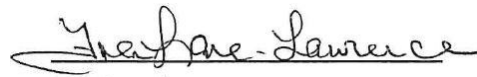
Friends, we care deeply about every member of the Presbytery of Lake Michigan. While we long to be together to worship in person, our greater desire is for the safety and well-being of each member of the Body of Christ. We believe that our faith leads us to make decisions with the interests of our most vulnerable members in mind. We encourage each member and session to continue to worship and do ministry remotely until all members can gather safely without risk of infection.

Thank you for your continued faithfulness and for the opportunity to serve the Presbytery of Lake Michigan.

Yours in Christ,



Cal Bremer
Transitional Co-Leader



Fran Lane-Lawrence
Transitional Co-Leader/ Stated Clerk