

## Presbytery of Lake Michigan

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

March 5, 2021

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

Our Dear Siblings in Christ,

During this past year as we've lived, worked and served together as the Body of Christ, we've come to know profoundly that life in the church while dealing with COVID is like living in the wilderness. We've had to adapt to a whole new way of life. We've had to relearn how to engage in the ministries Christ has called us to, and at the same time learn new truths about ourselves and this awful disease. We have been faithful and, even now, we continue to faithfully adapt.

The Good News and the reality which we live as the people of God is that God does not abandon God's people in wilderness places. God is not restricted to a building or a geographical location. God has been and continues walking with us as we learn and grow and faithfully serve our God.

We are privileged to have options when making choices about gathering for religious activities. These choices do not necessarily align with restrictions placed upon other types of businesses or organizations within our communities. There are many competing values as we make decisions about our ministries.

Our work as pastors calls us to consider the spiritual, mental and emotional health of those entrusted in our care, as well as their physical health, as we consider the risk of viral transmission in the community.

We have a full range of options to consider, from gathering physical space with our most familiar range of activities to gathering in virtual space, taking a sabbatical from some activities or a hybrid of these. These are weighty decisions requiring spiritual engagement and careful discernment. Human bodies and souls will bear the weight of our decisions. Our freedom brings with it the call to serve each other in love – looking out for the interests of others rather than our own desires; considering the most vulnerable among us.

The approval of multiple vaccines for use in the United States, the beginning of distribution, the decline in the number of many important indicators has fueled our hope that we will soon be able to gather in physical space once again in significant numbers.

It is imperative that we temper our expectations with the recognition that we are dependent upon human-organized systems (vaccine distribution) and behavior (vaccination rates and continued protective choices to reduce disease transmission). We can all assist by following the latest public health guidance, encouraging our members and communities to receive approved vaccines, and maintaining the practice of utilizing individual and community protective measures against the COVID virus. We need to remain careful and vigilant until most of the population has been vaccinated, and the rates of viral transmission have declined substantially and remain low.

While COVID and its mutations exist, the most medically vulnerable members of our congregations will continue to be at risk. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) and those from the medical community have advised that this will continue for the foreseeable future at least until fall.

Still, we do not believe it is realistic to adopt the position, “we won’t go back until everyone can go back safely.” Instead, we urge Sessions to choose a combination of the best mitigations you can agree upon as a community and utilize the most vital hybrid ministry options to be an inclusive body of faith.

Every choice involves an element of risk for us and for those participating in activities in our churches. Our recommendations are for reduced risk but are not without potential danger if implemented.

**We are recommending that our congregations not meet in-person/within buildings until after June 30, 2021 when a significant segment of the population and many of our pastors and worship leaders will have had an opportunity to be vaccinated.**

**We recognize that community conditions and practices vary by geographic region and demographic constituency. We are recommending that our congregations use the following data as they make decisions between now and September 30, 2021.**

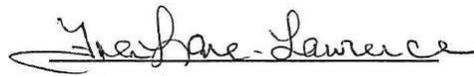
- **Vaccination rates** -- When more than 50% of the population has been vaccinated, we can expect that it will begin to have an impact on viral transmission. (Although significant “herd immunity” and its associated large drop in viral transmission will likely not be fully reached until vaccination rates exceed 75%.) We recommend that congregations wait until the vaccination rate is 70% or greater in your community.
- **COVID cases per 100,000 population** -- We recommend that the fourteen-day average number of new cases be fewer than eight (8) cases per 100,000.
- **Rates of positive testing** – We recommend that the fourteen-day average positive test rate be lower than 7%.

**We recommend the following steps forward.**

- 1. We urge faith communities to step carefully from a closed building to a partially open one.**
- 2. We recommend the introduction of smaller groups to use the building while they maintain all the recommended prevention protocols as a first step forward.**

3. **Hybrid ministry and a gradual, phased return is faithful stewardship. Provide at least five (5) weeks between the incremental steps.**
4. **Make use of outdoor gathering areas for worship and meetings.**
5. **Singing as a congregation should be one of the last activities to be reintroduced to our gatherings.**
6. **Church meals – including funeral luncheons – continue to be places where disease is too easily spread. We do not recommend hosting or attending them. As a ministry to those who are hungry among us, we can modify our options to distribute meals to go until it is safe to host people in a building again.**
7. **We strongly recommend making face masks mandatory and advise having someone who is not the pastor responsible for ensuring people adhere to this.**
8. **Communicate clearly to the congregation to stay home if they feel at all “off,” if they know they have been exposed, or if they are waiting for COVID test results.**
9. **Use less than the full capacity of your space and increase physical distance between household groups (six (6) to ten (10) feet is recommended). Think about ways to hold distancing outside the sanctuary – outside the door, in entryways, by coat racks, near and in restrooms.**

Our greatest desire is for our siblings in Christ and their communities to remain safe and healthy while the church continues to answer God’s call to service and worship. We are so grateful to be your partners in ministry and give thanks to God for you always.



Fran Lane-Lawrence  
Transitional Co-Leader/ Stated Clerk



Cal Bremer  
Transitional Co-Leader