

May 6, 2020

A Pastoral Letter to the Churches of the Presbytery of Western North Carolina

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We greet you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the great Shepherd of the sheep, on whose redemptive presence and power we especially lean in these complicated days.

Following a discussion with the Committee on Ministry on May 5, 2020 and in anticipation of a similar discussion with the General Council on May 13, 2020, we are writing to offer advice and counsel to the churches of the Presbytery of Western North Carolina about the prospect of reopening churches. We believe that the fundamental concern of God for the well-being of all that God has made is the encompassing framework for thinking through the matter of reopening.

As Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, as Noah and his surprisingly mixed family spent 40 days on the ark, and as the Israelites spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness, we are a community of faith that understands that extended periods of disruption to our routines do not signal an absence of God. Instead, they can involve a special preparation by God for a new era with new possibilities for the flourishing of God's love and grace throughout the earth. This engenders hope that the COVID-19 disruption of our day can yet be used by God for new and deepened experiences of divine love and mercy. So, despite our eagerness to "reopen" our churches, we remember that new things may be opened to us even in the present state of affairs. We come to our thoughts about reopening our churches mindful that the love of God and neighbor is our one sure guide.

With these thoughts in mind, we have looked at the three-phase plan for the gradual reopening of commercial and social life in North Carolina outlined by the governor's office and pondered its implications for our churches. We are encouraged that each stage is dependent on careful measurements of how the infections of COVID-19 are retreating. This is consistent with the gospel imperative to reach out to and support the vulnerable and suffering, and to protect as many as possible from the same suffering. **These careful measurements will determine the pace at which we may move from one phase to the next, and what the measures reveal will also determine whether we move steadily forward, or back and forth instead of in a straight line.** If the line turns out not to be straight, we can remember the less than steady trajectory of Israel's wilderness wandering to which allusion has already been made.

Assuming for the moment that the measures of public health will make it possible for us to progress through the three phases as outlined, we recommend the following for the churches of our Presbytery:

1. **Phase one (May 9 through May 23 or May 30) is NOT a time for seeking to return to in person worship**, interactive mission activities, group study, or committee meetings. Instead, we should rely on the various means we have learned since mid-March, and those we may yet learn, to worship, serve, study, and make necessary decisions. And particularly, we should remember that many in our congregations can be, by virtue of their age if nothing else, especially vulnerable to this infection.

2. **Phase two (May 24 or May 31 through June 22 or July 12) specifically speaks of allowing gatherings in houses of worship at “reduced capacity,” but serious questions remain of how realistic this is.** The account of this phase simultaneously speaks of strong encouragement for vulnerable populations to stay home to stay safe. The question for many if not most of our churches is: will we try to provide remote worship options for some, while some others gather in limited numbers (“reduced capacity”) face to face? What is the most realistic way for us to go forward? And how will we attend to increased responsibility for sanitizing the physical spaces in our church buildings?
3. **Phase three (June 22 or July 13 through ...) suggests that restrictions of vulnerable populations may be lessened, but also insists that physical distancing should be practiced and settings where it cannot be practiced should be minimized—meaning church life will be different.** Thus, while greater capacity in houses of worship is anticipated in this phase, a host of important questions need to be addressed. Principally, as in phase two, will some be involved in our worship by remote means, and others face to face? If we have face to face worship, is singing recommended because of the easier spread of contagion thereby? What will be our communion practices? How will offerings be gathered? What will become of hymnbooks, bulletins, and pew bibles? Of course the responsibility for sanitizing spaces will be further heightened.

It is important to recognize that even Phase three of reopening is not a full return to business as usual, for either the wider society or the church. As long as transmission of COVID-19 is known to be happening significantly, special attention to things like physical distancing and wearing masks will be important. Therefore, our church life will not be what we remember before mid-March for a long time.

A recent article employed a helpful metaphor: “blizzard, winter, little ice age.” Naturally, we have initially been dealing with the health emergency in the same way we might deal with a blizzard. We have hunkered down, gotten used to doing more things at home, and generally laid low. But blizzards don’t usually last for 6 weeks or more. So now we are having to face the fact that we are dealing with a seriously compromising winter that constricts and restricts our world in ways that are uncomfortable for a longer period of time. Certainly, through the coming summer we will be dealing with this “out of season” winter that changes and limits our church life and work in many ways. And though the “little ice age” part of the metaphor may seem extreme, it is likely that we need to be prepared to cope with enduring changes in our lives, including our church lives, for at least the next 12 to 18 months.

So, to end where we began, disruptions in the routines of life are not unusual to the people of God. Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness, Noah and the animals in the ark, Jesus and his tempter in the desert—all found the paradoxical presence of the persistent and loving purpose of God in great disruptions. May we find the same.

Attached is a checklist of questions for church leadership to consider as we move through our disruptions. And here is a [link](#) to a comprehensive list of theological and practical considerations prepared by the General Assembly. We know you take comfort as we do in the surrounding and supporting prayers of all our churches for each other in these days.

Grace and Peace!

Questions for Churches to Consider

- Has your insurance company weighed in on benchmarks for reopening, and for operating any programs? How will this influence your decision?
- Will you maintain an online streaming option once you are back together worshipping in physical space? How will that need to adjust when there is also in-person worship happening?
- How many people can your worship space hold if you are worshipping in family groups sitting 6 feet apart?
- How will you discourage the receiving line after church and/or congregating after worship services?
- When in earlier phases of relaunch, how will you cap attendance at events so there is room for members of the community to join you and so you don't go over guidelines?
- How can you encourage small group gatherings with the building of small group, discipleship systems, etc. in the earlier phases of relaunching – possibly even before we move from Stay at Home into Phase One? How might you continue these when in-person worship resumes?
- How will you ensure sanitation and disinfection in regards to communal spaces?
 - a. Worship bulletin disposal, prayer books, etc
 - b. Areas where small groups gather during the week
 - c. Nurseries and/or playgrounds
 - d. Pews or chairs following worship
 - e. Doorknobs, bathrooms, other areas that people touch when in your building
- How will you update your building use agreements to reflect the new realities of COVID-19?
- If someone contracts COVID-19, how will you communicate with your congregation and members who may have come into contact with that individual while maintaining privacy and pastoral care?
- If someone who has been in your building contracts COVID-19, how will you do a more intensive cleaning prior to its next use?
- How will you communicate your safety plan and best practices to the congregation?