

When can we do church again?

We all miss coming together. Perhaps you recall the words from the hymn

*“Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love,
the fellowship of kindred hearts is like to that above”*

It is good to come together to worship, to pray, to see one another, to be in community. As the weeks of staying at home continue, we miss each other more and more.

As of Friday, May 15, Governor Larry Hogan has opened up some businesses and public spaces while other remain closed. Some of the recommendations involve religious communities gathering for worship. We are planning at this moment to have the buildings remain closed through the end of May. No decisions have been made beyond that date.

By the time you read this, the situation and recommendations are likely to have changed in several ways. The situation is fluid and dynamic as we continue to learn more about the virus and its transmission. One thing, however, should never change. The church should always be concerned with the well-being of others. One of the best ways to show love is first “do no harm.” We will need to err on the side of safety, particularly for those who are most vulnerable.

We have been growing in our ability to do church ministry in new ways. Bible study, worship, prayer and fellowship activities are available in new virtual and online formats and people are appreciative for what is offered. Some of what we are doing is actually reaching many people that were not coming to our building before the pandemic. Our online worship services regularly are getting more than 700 click or visits each week. We will continue to offer online worship and other ministries for the foreseeable future so that there will be ways for people to participate who may not feel safe to come to the buildings. Of course, not everyone can make use of these ministries, but they have become meaningful to many who do.

I’ve been reading articles and emails and meeting with other colleagues about what might be prudent when it comes to gathering together and the use of the church buildings. As time goes on there will be ways that we may begin to offer services and other events in person. We don’t have outdoor spaces available to do “drive up” worship in cars but it might be possible to arrange for the use of a parking lot for this purpose. I’ve contacted the City of Frederick to see about the possible use of the Bandshell for outdoor services this summer. (They aren’t issuing permits at this time.) We will continue to consider these and other options including how to re-open our own facilities.

To this end, I am working with leaders in the congregation to form a task force to look at our context and all the key matters that will need to be considered before resuming in-person gatherings. This includes:

- Do church members feel ready and willing to return? (If no one feel safe to come, it doesn’t really matter if the building is open or closed)
- Do we have the ability to sanitize the facilities adequately?
- Can we maintain appropriate social distancing?

- What worship practices will need to be modified or eliminated for the time being?
- What other programs can we provide safely? (Can we, for example, provide Sunday School, Bible studies, weddings and other gatherings on site?)

Many of the things we've routinely done in the building on a Sunday morning in the past can actually spread the transmission of the virus. It is highly possible for people to unknowingly share the virus with others through public singing, using a hymnal or bulletin, the passing of offering plates, and conversation at coffee/fellowship time. Even though the sanctuary is large and would allow for adequate spacing, we have to consider how to adequately disinfect the pews and pew cushions, doorways, restrooms, handrails and other areas used by those who enter the building.

The bottom line is that we can be a witness and a sign of God's grace wherever we are. God is still with us, we are not alone. We are still the body of Christ and we are still doing the work of ministry, growing in our walk with Christ, offering care to those in need, lifting up hope, making disciples for the transformation of the world. So, we never stopped doing "church", we just shifted in the ways we do it.

Stay well and may the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you to bring you peace,

Pastor Steve