

Re:Gathering

How we're processing our decisions

As our community moves into the next phase of reopening, we want to share some principles guiding our decisions about regathering as a church. By the way, we like “regathering” versus “reopening.” We never closed our ministry; we just stopped gathering for a time. We’ve been open and serving all along. But when will we regather? And on what are we basing this decision?

This has been a frequently asked question, and we appreciate it. Obviously the factors are many and complex, so let’s distill it down into some principles:

1. Health and Safety

The primary biblical metaphor that describes our work as leaders of the church is *shepherding*. We are charged with the care and feeding and healthy growth of God’s flock. And its safety and protection, which the coronavirus threatens. Consider:

- It is a highly contagious disease: the larger the gathering, the greater the likelihood of its spread.
- It is an insidious disease: some people are asymptomatic and not even aware they have it; others are slain by it.
- It attacks most viciously the most vulnerable among us: the elderly and those with underlying health conditions.

Moreover, our local community has had more recent outbreaks, particularly among those working in the mushroom industry. Whereas many areas across the state and county have had a declining number of cases, we have pockets of increase locally.

All these factors call for extra caution. We want to follow public health guidelines and be slow in regathering. We believe this represents good, loving shepherding, especially as we continue to care for our flock in other ways.

And if someday, through hindsight, we learn that we might have been able to open sooner than we did, we probably haven’t lost much. But if someday we learn that we opened too soon, the losses could be catastrophic. Wisdom dictates that we move slowly.

2. Ministry Effectiveness

Some of the guidelines for preventing the spread of the disease would severely inhibit our effectiveness, especially in a worship service: Limiting our overall seating capacity; staying at least six feet apart; wearing a mask; not raising your voice or singing (which spreads aerosols farther); not remaining in place with others for any length of time; all of this would make a gathering far less than optimal.

Compounding the problem are recommendations about children and senior adults: namely, that they not share spaces. So would we ask all seniors over a certain age to stay home? Or ask people not to bring children? Would people even want to bring their children?

Online worship isn't perfect and isn't ultimately preferable. But in this season it gets the job done. Here's a great rule of thumb we heard: "When your onsite ministry can be better than your online ministry, meet onsite. Until then, stay online." We think what makes sense.

And what makes onsite better? Real face-to-face relationships. And warm greetings. And loud singing. And talking. And laying a hand on someone's shoulder while praying for them. In other words, all the things we really shouldn't do yet.

3. Biblical Convictions

We have our biblical convictions, and these weigh heavily in our decisions as well. Convictions like these:

- Jesus rose on the first day, and his people have been gathering on that day ever since.
- "Church" by definition means "gathering" or "assembly."
- The Scriptures command us *not* to forsake gathering together (Hebrews 10:25).
- Human beings are created as physical, relational people. We need each other.
- Each person has a spiritual gift for the building up of others, and those gifts are best expressed through real, tangible, person-to-person connections.
- Jesus was, and is, the Word made flesh who dwelt among us, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). Following him, we too must incarnate the gospel.

All that to say: We want and need to meet! We can't *not* meet forever!

Thankfully, after a relatively brief hiatus (objectively speaking), groups may meet again. This is good news because groups are the basic unit of congregational health. A small group is a "micro-church." As we gather in groups for Sunday "worship watch parties" and align around our vision to cultivate the Fruit of the Spirit, we can exercise and strengthen the backbone of our church. And when we regather in even larger numbers down the line, we'll be a better church for having gone through this.

4. Gospel Witness

We want to be an asset and credit to our local community. We want to be a source of blessing to it. We want to be "salt and light," letting people see our good works so that they're moved to glorify God (Matt. 5:13-16). This calls for great tact and wisdom. "Be as shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves," Jesus taught (Matt. 10:16).

Our slowness in regathering sends a message to our world that we're wise and caring and paying attention to everyone's needs. Coupled with our generosity in providing food and other resources to those in need, we commend the gospel of God. We represent Christ and his kingdom well, and we reinforce the good news we ultimately want to spread. We want to spread Christ, not coronavirus!

Unfortunately, we've seen some churches create the opposite effect. Claiming their rights to public assembly, they've defied authorities, spread the disease, and become a news story—not a good news story—but bad news of self-assertion and defiance. None of us wants that.

So we're weighing all these factors. Sometimes it feels like we're juggling competing factors! But we're praying daily for God's wisdom and guidance, and to date it seems we've had it.

In the near term

1. We are encouraging groups to keep meeting through the summer, and to gather in person as they are willing and able. We suggest Sundays as a good meeting time: Take in our online service together and use our discussion guide to process it.

But we add this exhortation: ***Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace*** (Ephesians 4:3). Let us never divide over wearing masks or not wearing masks, over meeting in person or meeting online. Do not let the Enemy sow strife in Christ's body! Rather, let us defer to one another; let us show special honor to our more vulnerable members; let us respect the conscience and faith of those who see things differently from us. As the saying goes: "In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity."

2. We are offering our grounds for meeting and, if necessary, our indoor spaces. Contact our office to inquire.
3. We are weighing the possibility of outdoor gatherings this summer.
4. **We are cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit this summer.** We're providing resources for groups and households—from daily Bible readings to weekly memory verses to experiential learning activities. We hope everyone joins in. Let's yield to God's Spirit and allow him to yield his fruit—the strength and character of Jesus himself—in us.
5. We are praying diligently every day. Join us. Nothing ultimately can go wrong if, every day, we:

P – Praise and thank God

R – Repent of our sins

A – Ask for what we need

Y – Yield ourselves to God, to do his will