



First Presbyterian Church

65 North Third Street
Newark, OH 43055

Dear Friends in Christ,

Everyone wants to know what the plan is for worship this summer. I do not know if it is possible to plan too much further than that. First, session decided on Sunday that we would not have in sanctuary service until July. The new goal date for our first in sanctuary service is July 12th. This new date is a goal that we hope will happen. There are so many factors that could delay it. I believe that July 12th is a very likely and very possible date.

All eight members of session present at Sunday's meeting felt that a return to the sanctuary before July would be too much of a risk and would not in the best interest of our church or our congregation. I can promise to you that this was the overwhelming sentiment of our congregation's ruling elders. Every member of session has spent a significant portion of time in discernment. Decisions about corporate worship, congregational safety, and community ministry are not taken lightly.

So many factors were considered. Each member of session had differing concerns and deciding factors. Here are a few factors that seemed to be the most prominent. 1) The fact that the congregation is made up of many people who are more at risk of dangerous complications if infected with COVID-19. 2) It is too soon to tell what will happen now that most of the state has opened back up. It will take several weeks before we will be able to see if the state's reopening will cause a rise in the spread of COVID-19. 3) The Drive-In service is doing very well and it allows more individual congregation members the ability to attend service. IE: Everyone who can attend a service in the sanctuary can attend the drive-in service. You do not even have to have a car. If a person who can attend a service in the sanctuary does not attend the drive-in service; they are choosing not to. Not everyone who can attend the drive-in service can attend a service in the sanctuary. If we go indoors, without offering reasonable alternatives, we as a church are excluding them.

The goal date of July 12th allows us to get a clearer picture of what the epidemic will be like over the summer. We will be able to see if the summer weather suppresses the spread. We will see if opening up Ohio causes a spike in new cases. We will be past the current state mandate which limits group size to 10 (we know churches do not have to follow this.) This goal date allows us the opportunity to plan reasonable alternatives for those who may still be at great risk.

Here is a thought that keeps rolling around in my head. If we open the sanctuary too soon, the risk is increasing our congregation members' likelihood of illness and death. It also risks excluding those who are highly susceptible. If we do not open soon enough, the risk is frustration.

This is a time unlike any other. I ask that everyone offers grace and understanding to each other. The last thing any of us needs is to become the topic of gossip, the target of misplaced frustration or judgement. All of us are just trying to do the best we can, to make the best decisions we can, with the information and recourses we have.

Thanks,

Rev Steven Band

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