

6.19.2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ in the Michigan District,

The Coronavirus has certainly had—and continues to have—its “heyday!” I don’t doubt at all the Devil has thoroughly enjoyed this time when Christians have not fellowshiped in worship and especially at the Lord’s Supper. Please remember that it was as good neighbors (Matthew 22:34-40) and out of respect for authority (Romans 13:1-7) that our congregations generally agreed not to meet publicly when the Government – Federal and State – first announced constraints to fight COVID-19.

Nonetheless, how thankful we should be that our congregations quickly made use of alternative delivery systems to maintain as many ‘services’ as they could for our people and often for the community as well! Initially, thousands more people were being reached by our online worship services and Bible Studies. We have, as is the Christian habit, gone the extra mile by continuing, as we did, not to gather when the ‘Stay Home/Stay Safe’ orders were ‘continually’ extended.

People of Hope ... IT’S TIME! ... for Christians to gather together in person for worship, for Word and Sacrament ministry which we know will bring healing, encouragement, and strength not just to the worshippers, but for the community as a whole, as God’s people “shine like stars in the universe.” (Philippians 2:15)

Here’s What We Know, Share, and Recommend in Christian Love ...

- Other businesses and industries are being allowed to open up as long as they follow health and safety guidelines. Congregations are able to follow similar guidelines.
- When congregations gather, they should follow generally accepted recommendations and safety/health precautions in dealing with COVID-19 (e.g., distancing [6’], wearing of facemasks, handwashing, etc.). These recommendations are usually found on each County’s Health Department website.
- Each congregation should have a plan for re-opening that comes from careful study and has been determined by congregational leadership and is published. Each congregation must come to its own conclusions and determine its own plan.
- When congregations gather, they do so in smaller numbers than they might otherwise (the current recommendation is 25% of capacity). More services whenever honoring the recommendation may be an answer.
- We recommend that congregations are especially sensitive to the relative level of infections in their community and act accordingly.

**** Congregational members should be gentle with one another as they begin to gather respecting and honoring the relative comfort level of other members. ** Do not let Satan have a foothold and try to divide us.**

I believe that Martin Luther addressed “physical distancing” in a letter dealing with the 1527 bubonic plague: Let us “[not] tempt God by exposing oneself to contagion” ... Let us “warn against the over-bold who scorn ordinary precautions against contagion, thus tempting God, who has created medicine and given us the intelligence to care for our bodily health. Furthermore, such recklessness endangers others with whom one comes in contact.”

With all that has gone on with this pandemic, dear friends in Christ, let me, then clearly discourage the following ...

- not commending ourselves and our mission to God;
- forgetting or fleeing from our faithful God in faithlessness;
- living in Satan's "groupthink" and continue to cocoon being infused only with fear and panic;
- failing to see and be engaged in the expanded opportunity for mission to the community and world that even this crisis presents;
- showing no love for our neighbor by giving no witness to Christ and His love or finding a way to do so;
- not taking our needs and the needs of the world to God in prayer;
- distancing ourselves spiritually, mentally, and emotionally from others by disengaging with them; and
- falsely believing or sharing that it is distrust in God to insure, make changes, or take precautionary measures, etc.

And, by God's grace, forgiveness, and mercy as well as the strength He daily and richly supplies in His Word, let me strongly encourage ...

- living "Emmanuel," God with us, as we commend our life and mission to Him;
- recognizing our saving faith, a gift of the Spirit, clings to the God Who saves and turns everything to good;
- leading with Christ, His gift of forgiveness and eternal life so that they predominate our life and sharing;
- trusting in God through Christ and not in man, human endeavors, and strength;
- embracing the fact that God's Word is not hindered or bound as we make use of every opportunity to share His Word;
- using the rational and intellectual gifts God has given us in creation to make life/mission decisions under His Word;
- loving and serving our neighbor even as considering how to protect their health and life in precautionary ways;
- the saving faith that clings to God's steadfast love and care, which is NEVER quarantined and contained;
- living and practicing the vibrancy of relational discipleship with Christ and others in His mission; and
- **Hebrews 10:22-25, that is, that we**
 1. **draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us**
 2. **hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how to**
 3. **stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together [we are having virtual meetings temporarily through various media], as is the habit of some, but**
 4. **encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.**

I do thank God for you and for all of God's servants who serve us all in our congregations and schools. I thank God that we are ALL given the opportunity to pursue life under Good Friday's blood-stained cross but in clear view of Jesus' victorious, open tomb of Easter knowing the life and living hope He has given us and that it has the power to give that life and living hope to others.

May God bless you in your continued walk with Jesus.

Sincerely, trusting in and continuing to walk with Jesus with you.

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People of Hope...Vigorously Making Known the Love of Christ