

June 21, 2020

Dear St. Paul's friends,

When will our church re-open for in-person worship?

I know that for many of you, that is a question heavy on your mind and heart. Trust me, it *weighs* on my heart as well. I spend a great amount of time in prayer about this, as I know Donnie and the rest of your staff and leadership are doing. Church Council and other ministry leadership teams have been meeting to discern best decisions for when to reopen. We are developing plans that center on the health and wellbeing of every person who enters our building for worship or other purposes.

While it may seem so, this is not a *simple* decision. Likewise, reopening will not be *simply* opening the doors and returning to worship as we knew it up to March 8th. One thing is for sure, I am struck – though not surprised – by how much more difficult the decision to reopen the church is now, than the decision to close was in the first place. There is much to consider.

St. Paul's leadership's decision to reopen is guided by multiple sources from the State and local governments and the UMC Conference. We are currently developing guidelines and requirements for a safe-as-possible indoor worship experience. The guidelines/requirements that are established will be applicable to all...members, regular worship attendees, guests and staff alike.

One question pilots our discernment. "We all may be willing to risk our own health and safety for the sake of returning to the familiarity of in-person worship. Are we willing to risk the health and safety of another?" As people of faith who follow the Risen Christ, the one who taught and modeled selfless love, this should always be our – and your – guiding question. (*c.f.* Philippians 2:3-4)

While some details are still being ironed out, this we do know. We will phase back in to in-person worship slowly, with small numbers gathering each Sunday. At this time, the plan is to continue to worship at only one service, at our regular 9:30am time each week. There is a *possibility* that we will add a second service, either on Sunday or mid-week, if we determine that is needed.

This, too, we do know. Worship will look and feel different for quite a while. All of our state, local and conference resources (and directives from our insurance carrier) are clear. Certain wellness and safety protocols are mandatory in order to relaunch in-person worship. These will include, but not be limited to:

- Worship participation will be limited, initially, to 25 worshipers (not including clergy and the staff/laity worship team).
- In order to manage the maximum capacity, worship attendance will require pre-registration to come to service. (Details for registering will come at a later date.)
- Live singing will not be a part of the service. (Gayle is working on alternative ways to offer worshipful music.)
- Strict social distancing will be followed for entry into the church, seating in the sanctuary and exit from the church following the service.
- Each person entering the building will be screened for symptoms/exposure including questions and temperature-taking.
- Attendance will be taken and contact information collected from each worshiper (or family/group representative), in order to help with potential exposure notification and contact tracing.
- Masks will be required during the duration of the time you are in the building...no exceptions.
- Persons over the age of 65, and/or those who suffer with high risk conditions, such as heart or lung disease, cancer, diabetes or otherwise have a compromised immune system, are strongly encouraged to remain sheltering in place and worshipping via Zoom and/or Facebook Live. (Let's pray for a vaccine sooner than expected!)

- Anyone who has tested positive for COVID-19 will be required to stay home and quarantine until all symptoms are clear and you are no longer contagious. (Please contact Rachel, Pastor Donnie or me immediately upon receiving a positive test.)
- Anyone who has a known exposure to someone who has tested positive for COVID is asked to stay home and self-quarantine for 14 days before returning to in-person worship. (Again, please contact Rachel, Pastor Donnie or me immediately when you know you've been exposed.)
- Personal sanitation practices will be expected while in the church building (details to come).

These minimum protocols will be in place. There will be more. Before we gather again, you will receive updated instructions again, and again. (You will likely get tired of reading them. Please read anyway!)

Rest assured, even after we begin to gather in the sanctuary again, we will continue live-streaming the service just as we are doing now. Live-streaming worship is here to stay. Since beginning distance worship, we reach more people every week than we ever reach on a Sunday morning sitting in the pews inside the walls of our sanctuary. We welcome old friends who are able to join us in worship on Zoom or Facebook, when they haven't been able to physically come to the church to worship for years.

Therefore, before we can begin to gather in-person again, we must get all the technologies in place to support quality and efficient live-streaming from the sanctuary. A team at St. Paul's is currently working on that. It is a several week process to upgrade the infrastructure to support our, now, ongoing digital requirements. Additionally, the church facility itself must be prepared for a gathering, much like you experience when you enter a grocery store or bank.

Finally, our logistics team has determined that it will take no less than a dozen volunteers *every Sunday* in order for in-person worship to begin and be sustained (not including our clergy and worship leaders). That is a lot of hearts and hands at work every week to ensure a meaningful, and safe-as-possible, worship experience. You may be called to be a part of this important, and expanded, worship team. Please, prayerfully consider the calling to serve in this way. "It takes a village" has never been truer than during this time of COVID, it seems to me. (That said, if you receive a phone call about participating, even if you feel led to serve, PLEASE let us know if you fall into one of the high-risk categories. Again, your wellbeing and the wellbeing of everyone else is, always, our highest and holiest priority. We must have an honest discussion about the timing of serving in this way at this time.)

So, as you can see, relaunching in-person worship is no simple matter. It is both a desire, and a burden of love. All the logistics must be prepared and in place before we can gather once again. In that light, our tentative target date to relaunch is September 13th, the Sunday after Labor Day. Of course, there is a possibility of gathering earlier or waiting a little longer, depending on preparation and the status of COVID cases in our county and state. We will continue to communicate updates with you. In the meantime, please don't hesitate to contact me or Donnie if you have any questions.

Know that you continue to be in our prayers for peace, health and wellbeing.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Leslie".