



May 12, 2020

Dear First Brethren Family,

Greetings! I don't need to tell you that these last two months have been challenging for all of us, for a variety of reasons. The coronavirus pandemic has forced us to stay in, to change our routines, and to learn to love others in an unfamiliar way- by staying 6 feet away from them! This of course has affected our church's ministries as well. We haven't met publically for worship since March 15th, but thankfully we have been able to use online content to get our message out, and we have been able to keep in touch through phone calls, letters, and Zoom meetings. It has been a season of adjustments, but we hope over the coming weeks to be able to slowly return to more familiar habits.

Last evening our Official Board met to discuss our plan for reopening our church. You may know that many area churches have already begun worshipping; others are waiting a few weeks, depending on the needs of their congregations. After prayer and discussion, the Official Board has set the date of our next Sunday morning worship service as **June 7th at 10am**.

Several factors played into this decision. The first factor is the reality that the majority of our attendees are older than 65, and our state and federal officials are encouraging those in this age group to be more cautious in resuming "normal" life. The second, and perhaps most important, factor was a desire by the Board not to begin meeting before we had adequate time to prepare, and communicate, our plan to all of you. Because of the health risks involved, we want to make sure we get this right, and there are several details we need to get in place before we can safely meet on Sunday mornings.

Beginning June 7th, we will meet for worship at 10am in the church Sanctuary. Our worship services will be a "blended" format, meaning our praise band will lead us in a couple of songs, and we will also sing a couple of hymns with the organ. Because of the need for social distancing, Jr. Church will not be meeting until at least the fall. However, there will be a short children's message each week during the service, and families will be given activity bags with crayons, paper, and "quiet" toys to occupy children during the sermon.

We will need to work together to keep each other safe over the next few months. Here are some ways we will accomplish that during our Sunday worship services:

- First, if you feel at all not well on a Sunday morning, please stay home and use the audio or video sermon for the week.
- To help with social distancing, every other pew in the Sanctuary will be closed each week. This means

that only the 1st, 3rd, 5th, etc. pew will be available. Within the pews, we ask that you try to stay 6 ft. away from those not a part of your family. There will also be seating available in the overflow area.

- You are welcome to use face masks while at the church, but these are optional. You may wear them while entering and exiting the building, during worship, etc. We also ask everyone to use hand sanitizer upon entering the building.
- In order to keep our building clean, we ask that you please use the Sanctuary (north) doors to enter and exit the building. So that this area can be used for drop off, please do not park in front of the Sanctuary doors. To prevent people from needing to touch the Sanctuary doors, the doors will be propped open before and after the service.
- As we did on March 15th, you may drop off your offering in the back of the Sanctuary. There will be a box there for this purpose. We will not be passing the plate during the worship service.
- As state officials are encouraging churches not to use paper handouts, the bulletin will continue to be available only in a digital format. However, we will try to get the Digital Bulletin out via email before Sunday worship.
- At the end of each worship service, we will dismiss everyone by row, beginning with the back row, much as is often done during weddings. This will help us to practice social distancing.

We understand that there will be many in our congregation who do not yet feel comfortable coming to church given the prevalence of the COVID virus. We want to encourage you to keep yourself safe as you feel led. We will make every effort to make our Sunday messages available online as quickly as possible. We hope to have the audio stream on the website by 12pm, and the sermon video online by 1pm each Sunday. In addition, our Deacons will continue to try to maintain contact with our congregants to make sure their spiritual needs are taken care of.

Finally, though we have had to cancel to this point nearly everything on our schedule, we are planning to do something really fun in the coming weeks. We are planning a Worship in the Park for Sunday, June 28th, at 10am. This will be held at Sunnyside Park in New Paris, at the Concert Pavilion next to the playground and the picnic area. Our worship band will lead us in singing, and there will be a morning message. This event will allow us to worship outside while practicing social distancing, and we will hopefully draw some others who don't normally attend our church. Though we will not be able to serve food, we encourage families to bring a picnic lunch for this event. Let's pray for good weather and a good turnout!

I want to thank everyone for your patience, flexibility, and mutual encouragement of each other during the past few months. Though we've not been able to meet in person, I feel like our relationships have deepened during this time, and for that I am thankful. We will likely have to make minor course corrections to our plan over the next few weeks, so I ask for your continued patience. If you have any needs, questions, or concerns during this time of transition, please know your pastor and church leadership are here for you. Please continue to pray that God be glorified through our church in the coming months, and for wisdom for us as we navigate this period in our church's history.

With Christ's love and affection,

Pastor Jeff Estep