

June 25, 2020

From: Rev. Allen Huff

Dear Friends,

Here comes a rather long one...

The Emergency Response Team (ERT) has met every Tuesday afternoon since late March. At the beginning of each meeting, we hear an update on Covid-19 cases in Tennessee as a whole, in NE TN (the Ballad Health footprint), and in Washington County. As virtually all of you are aware, those numbers have risen each week. In addition to keeping track of case counts, ERT members share reports and research being released by the CDC and by relevant state and federal agencies.

From those discussions we generated the survey which so many of you completed. Thank you! That survey revealed that the significant majority of JPC members remain vigilant and cautious regarding their approach to interacting with others during the pandemic. (The results of the survey are included as an attachment to this email.) From the survey, the ERT generated a list of recommendations regarding resumption of public worship and other gatherings for the session. In addition, we created a couple of possible timelines for return.

On Thursday, June 18, in a called meeting, the session heard a detailed report from the ERT. We had very honest and productive discussion but made no decision that night. We covered a tremendous amount of information and needed time to pray and process.

Last night (June 23), at its stated meeting, the session resumed its discussion. During that conversation, a clear consensus began to emerge: Given the overwhelming majority of JPC members who are in high-risk categories, coupled with the uncertainty about the direction the virus is taking, returning to public worship in the next couple of weeks is something for which we, the session, don't feel ready. Having said that, we know that some of you are more than ready to return. The survey said, however, that most of you plan to wait.

The session decided to go with the timeline scenario that has us beginning a carefully-phased return on August 9. Between now and then, the ERT will continue to meet and keep track of case counts and other updates and recommendations. The session will receive the weekly ERT minutes and reevaluate at its July 28 meeting. That is to say, August 9 is a goal. Should the situation warrant extending that target date, we will act in what we believe to be in the best interest of all members of our congregation.

That really is our primary concern—your health, that of your sisters and brothers in Christ, and of our wider community. So, when we do return, and when we ask everyone to do such things as wear masks, refrain from handshakes and hugs, sit only where everyone has adequate distance from others, and bear with worship services in which there is, at first, no congregational singing (all these are among the ERT's procedural recommendations adopted last night by the session), please know that these measures protect your health and safety and that of the people around you.

You'll hear us say this again, but wearing masks is something we will expect from everyone who attends worship. When soloists sing and when pastors speak, they will not wear masks, but they will at all other times. And we wear them as a concrete and visible sign of love for our neighbors and commitment to their well-being. Whether we're in worship or anywhere else, wearing a mask has become a kind of

spiritual discipline, a way to nurture awareness of our interconnectedness and of how our actions can affect others.

Some people have medical reasons for not wearing masks. Some simply don't want to wear them. We know and understand that. What we, as the session, ask of those who cannot and those choose not to wear masks, is that, for the sake of those around you, when we begin to resume worship, please, continue to join us online. That will be the most loving thing for yourselves and others. We thank you in advance for your understanding.

While we are still working on the fine points of the recommendations, we are keeping in mind that, for all of us, such procedures will make worship feel much different from what we are all used to and long for. And we sincerely hope that everyone will receive them with as much prayerful consideration as they were written. Per those procedures, the immediate next step is to gather a team of people to begin organizing the implementation of the phases of return. Three members of the session have volunteered to begin that process. In the meantime, Pastor Allen will continue sharing these updates. We know that you will have many questions about all of this. Please call or email any of us. We will bring your questions to the session.

Humankind has experienced and survived at least three pandemic bouts with the bubonic plague, multiple flu pandemics, polio epidemics, and countless other challenges. Through all of these things, many people died and many more suffered. But as humankind and human beings stride onward, we do so together. We need each other for support, encouragement, purpose, and joy in our lives. How we work through this time that is uniquely ours bears lasting witness to what we all truly trust and love, and our faith in the One whom we follow.

Paul's words to the Colossians are helpful for us right now: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another...forgive each other...Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." (Col. 3:12-14)

May we be to one another the presence of God's faithful presence, comforting hands, and healing strength.

Gratefully and Prayerfully,

The JPC Session and Pastor Allen