

Plan for Re-opening the First Presbyterian Church, Galena Illinois

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” Isaiah 43:2

Timing the re-opening:

On May 27, Kent Annan and Jamie D. Aten wrote the following in *Sojourners* magazine, “If infection with COVID-19 produced *immediate* green spots on one’s extremities, or purple stripes across one’s face, we would be better prepared to contain it. But because some carrying the virus will be asymptomatic, the ‘healthy’ among us may be putting those who are more vulnerable at risk. [...] As Christians, we are committed to practicing the love of God and love of neighbor. This includes doing what we can to safely reopen churches.”

Therefore, even though we long to re-open the church and return to worship in person as a church family when it is safe to do so, we will only re-open with great caution and careful planning to minimize the dangers to all involved.

The state of Illinois has a five-phase program for dealing with the sheltering at home requirements of the Covid-19 pandemic. As good citizens, we will, of course, not go any further or faster than the state allows. At the same time, we recognize that our local conditions may supersede guidelines from the state so that once the state allows us to re-open, our Session will still have to determine if the conditions in our particular congregation are such that it may be wise to re-open at that time or, conversely, to delay re-opening further.

The Session reserves that right given that the vast majority of churches which have already re-opened in this country have seen significantly diminished numbers in attendance as their members choose to protect their health by staying home. That’s understandable, given that most American churches today — including our own — have an older and therefore more vulnerable membership.

Another factor the Session will keep in mind is the psychological cost of re-opening the church too early, only to be forced by pandemic conditions to close again. As Katie Allred of Church Communications writes: “We rushed into this, but we don’t have to rush out.”

Currently, Illinois is in Phase 3, which states, “Gatherings of 10 people or fewer for any reason can resume.” That means we could hold a number of limited-attendance services in person, one after another with a time delay between each. However, that would seem to defeat the purpose of gathering together. Therefore, we will wait to re-open until some time after Phase 4 is declared. At that stage, “All gatherings of 50 people or fewer are allowed with this limit subject to change based on latest data & guidance.”

At that point, the Session may choose to survey the congregation to see how many of our members would be willing to return at that time.

According to the same *Sojourners* article cited above, “Reopening requires careful and thoughtful planning, intentional and effective communication with every person in the congregation, recruiting and training volunteers, purchasing requisite resources that are already in limited supply, and more. Reopening too quickly will not allow churches to have enough time to serve their congregation well and will not encourage the safety needed at this time.”

And so for the sake of all concerned, but especially for the sake of the most vulnerable among us, we will be cautious and follow the strict restrictions outlined below when we ultimately do re-open. Some of these will be awkward and some unpopular. However, all are important to avoid spreading the Covid-19 virus.

Changes that will be required during the re-opening:

Let's deal immediately with the change that's likely to be the most unpopular. Because singing significantly increases the risk of transmission of the virus by projecting respiratory droplets large distances, every expert we have consulted (and that includes thoroughly reading 39 different papers on the topic to date) says that churches cannot allow congregational or choral singing in person. Period. That said, worship without singing doesn't really feel like worship. So we will provide pre-recorded music videos that will be projected on our screen. We will ask everyone in attendance to not sing along. However if you choose to hum quietly behind your mask, I doubt anyone will say anything.

The congregation may be assured that the building will undergo a thorough disinfecting each week prior to worship.

Anyone showing symptoms of illness will be not be allowed to enter the church on that day and signs will be posted listing what those symptoms are.

Weather permitting, the doors will be left open, so that no one has to use door handles that may have been previously touched by many other attendees.

The names of everyone in attendance each week will be written down in case an unknowingly infected person attends a service and we need to respond with contact tracing.

That brings up the second potentially unpopular requirement: Anyone who isn't wearing a mask will not be allowed in the sanctuary. No exceptions. This requirement is to help protect your health and everyone else's. The sole exception to the mask rule will be for whomever is at the pulpit at any given time. That exception is intended to allow for better communication. But when they move away from the pulpit, they, too, will be asked to mask again.

An extra supply of disposable masks will be available for people who forgot to bring their own. Hand sanitizers will be also available near each entrance.

In order to keep safe social distancing, markers will be placed on the pews at spots which are at least six feet apart. Of course, families who live together may share a pew, all other individuals and groups will be spaced throughout the sanctuary.

There will be no "Passing the Peace."

Ribbons will be placed over the hymnals and pew Bibles as a reminder not to touch them. Instead Bible passages will be projected on the screen as they are read aloud. As noted, earlier, hymns will not be sung.

Communion will be provided by way of individual packages with two compartments, one containing a wafer and the other juice. Members will be invited to pick up a container from a table in the back of the sanctuary as they arrive at worship.

Offering plates will be placed by both sanctuary doors and members will be encouraged to leave any offerings in those plates as they leave the sanctuary. A prayer of dedication for those offerings will be said immediately prior to the benediction.

Following the benediction, attendees will be dismissed in order, starting with those closest to the doors and then moving toward those sitting closest to the front of the sanctuary. The idea of this is to help maintain physical distancing. There will be no one greeting at the door after the service and no in-person fellowship activities, although we may choose to continue our current post-worship online Zoom gatherings.

What happens if the pastor becomes seriously ill with Covid-19 or some other significant disease? Worship may continue in any of three ways:

- Elders or other members may lead worship. If they wish, they may draw from the pastor's 28 years of sermons preached in this church or (far less likely!) the three years he served as a student pastor.
- The congregation may hire one or more pulpit supply preachers.
- The presbytery is currently organizing ways for churches to share pastors online. Those options may be available at the time of the pastor's illness — if, in fact, he becomes ill. For more information about those options, call the Blackhawk Presbytery office at (815) 732-6111. Probably the best person to start with (although she may transfer you elsewhere) is Loreen Stravers. Her extension is 610.

In summary:

We'd like to summarize this plan using words taken from a similar plan written by the Presbyterian Church (USA) denomination:

"As this congregation begins to resume public activities, please know that we will do so through a careful process of discussion and discernment, with an abundance of caution and concern for those who are most vulnerable, upon consideration of the best scientific knowledge at our disposal, in the spirit of constant prayer, and with full trust in the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

"We may make mistakes along the way. There will surely be awkward moments as we adjust to new protocols and practices. There will be times of frustration, disappointment, and grief. We will have countless opportunities to exercise the spiritual gifts of patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control.

"But there will also be blessings. There will be wonderful surprises, great celebrations, and moments of deep satisfaction. We will get to see glimpses of the new thing God is doing, even now. We will have opportunities to savor the spiritual gifts of love, joy, peace, generosity, and faithfulness.

"Let us be faithful, then—to God and to one another—as we receive the gifts and work through the challenges of this time in the life of our congregation and world. Let us be guided by the Word,

responsive to the Spirit, and open to the grace of God. Let us remember that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus."

Approved by the Session and Trustees on June 11, 2020.