

## **Re-opening with Biblical Caution**

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We have just spent the last few months isolated from our friends and family. While our time under stay-at-home orders pales in comparison to the six months Noah and his family spent on an ark full of animals, it certainly would not be a stretch to say our lives have been just as hectic. Parents have been teleworking, if they have not been laid off or lost their jobs. Kids are trying to adjust to online schooling. Everyone is wearing a mask almost everywhere they go, attempting to maintain social distance while doing so. And, we are all looking forward to the time when we can return to living a somewhat normal life. But, how do we get to that point? How do we prepare for and transition back to the routine we once had? And, once there, what will it look like?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggest re-opening America will require us to progress together using “social distancing and other daily habits” that will allow for the reduction of exposure to COVID-19. The Commonwealth offers more specific guidelines for Pennsylvanians to follow such as maintaining six feet of distance from each other, limiting gatherings to less than 250 people, avoiding non-essential travel, and wearing face coverings, to mention a few. Some believe this approach is sound and will allow us to achieve an acceptable level of safety and security, while others think the guidelines are overly cautious.

As an emergency management professional, I can understand and appreciate both sides of this conversation. And, I could make an argument for either decision with the confidence it will meet the needs of those who will be affected. As the Conference Disaster Response Coordinator, part of my responsibility is to advise the Bishop on such issues, as they pertain to re-opening the churches within the Conference. Unlike my civilian counterparts, I have the unique ability to seek guidance and direction from scripture during the decision-making process.

I am convinced God has been in the business of disaster response and training disaster response specialists since He created the heavens and the earth. He used Noah during the Great Flood. In Genesis, we learn that Noah built the ark in preparation for flooding that would decimate the earth. He, his family members, and two of every kind of animal spent 40 days and nights afloat. They spent an additional 150 days on the ark waiting. During that time, Noah wrestled with the idea of when it would be safe to return to dry land.

Noah did not just open the doors of the ark, drop the ramp, and let the animals run free. He took some precautions. First, he sent a raven, then doves, to determine if the flood waters were drying up. According to scripture, the process took weeks before Noah was satisfied the waters had subsided and it was safe to leave the ark. Imagine standing on the side of the ark, looking down and seeing no water, yet still not being permitted to leave.

Transitioning to the “green phase” and returning to worship will require an exercise of the same level of caution used by Noah. It will take time and there will need to be protective

protocols in place. Face coverings may need to be worn. Sanitizer stations should be in place. We will still need to consider social distancing and limiting contact. And, it will not be easy.

We may be looking down from our “ark,” watching as the church across town opens its doors in apparent dry land. Even within our own denomination, churches will be doing things differently. Our neighbors may be transitioning in unique and dissimilar ways based on the county in which they are located, the size of their congregation, the wishes of that congregation, and its ability to provide a safe worship environment.

As we consider what it means to make this transition, re-open churches, and return to a semblance of normal, remember to use caution. Consider the safety of your congregations, develop a strategic plan to make that transition, and let the Holy Spirit guide your decision. Moving forward with caution will allow you to preserve the health of those in your congregations and eventually celebrate that good health and abundant life with which God has blessed us. It is the first thing Noah did after re-opening the ark.