

Doug Hoy
Disaster Response Coordinator

email: drc@susumc.org
phone: (717) 766-7441 ext. 3402
cell: (717) 773-3124

303 Mulberry Drive, Suite 500
Mechanicsburg, PA 17050-3179

To: People of the Susquehanna Conference
From: Douglas Hoy
Date: Monday, July 6, 2020
Subject: TRANSITIONING TO IN PERSON WORSHIP

It would be an understatement to say that, since the beginning of March, we have struggled to understand this pandemic. We have suffered physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Together, we have waited for guidance, followed instructions, and wondered what the next steps will be. We have asked what the future holds for us as believers.

The Wisconsin Council of Churches recently expressed the idea that our future “depends not only on the behavior of the virus, but on the actions of people – as individuals, churches, communities, and governments. The way forward will not be a matter of following a timetable, but of faithfully discerning the signs of the times, and responding accordingly” (<https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/>). Bishop Park’s recent words of encouragement indicate that our response, as a Conference, has been one of continued ministry “to provide worship, pastoral care, spiritual growth, outreach ministry, and witness, while observing practices that can protect lives.” We have continued our ministry in new and unique ways while observing those practices.

In the book of Hebrews, we are told of a group of Christians who faced similar circumstances. They struggled and endured suffering. During that time, they were encouraged to remain steadfast in their faith and persevere. Hebrews 10 calls them to “hold unswervingly” (v. 23) to the hope they professed, “spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (v. 24), and continue meeting and encouraging each other (v. 25). In a nut shell, the Hebrew writer seems to be urging Christians to find ways to reinstate their desire and ability to continue in ministry until the day came when they could meet in person again.

OUTSIDE WORSHIP

As we transition into the green phase and look to return to in person worship, we turn our thoughts to what that may look like. Our churches are forming committees to search for ways to accomplish that, while observing the practice of protecting those who are at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19. As plans are being made, it is imperative to utilize biblical caution, be safe,

be strategic, and be Spirit-led. And, we must keep in mind that returning to in-person worship may look different from, church to church and across the Conference.

Of course, the safest way to worship and preserve the health of those in our congregations is still to offer services online. However, as we know from our experiences during the last few months, it can be difficult to meet spiritual needs through this format. And, we are eager to resume meeting, encouraging, and continuing our mission and ministry. One opportunity to achieve this may involve conducting outside worship services. The guidelines and recommendations that follow can provide you with some insight into what that experience may look like.

SOCIAL DISTANCING IS THE NEW NORMAL

We are all familiar with the practice of social distancing. And, this should continue during outdoor worship. Groups from different households should be spaced at least 6 feet apart, further if your outdoor venue will allow it. You should be prepared to bring your own seating to help reduce the need to sanitize your church's resources. Additionally, pastors and worship leaders should be positioned further than the socially distant six feet. It is recommended that at least 25 feet be achieved between them and the closest attendees. Finally, while the risk of spreading the virus may be reduced when outdoors, encouraging the wearing of face coverings and urging those in high-risk categories to worship from home is still recommended.

A TOUCHLESS EXPERIENCE

One of the reasons for meeting in an outside venue is to reduce the need for sanitizing and disinfecting the church prior to and after services. Therefore, you should expect to have a "touchless" or "limited contact" worship experience. Hospitality teams and worship hosts should be present to provide you with direction when you arrive. They should be trained in the safety protocols offered by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. You may also see signs and posters displaying clear directions about what is expected.

You should also anticipate that passing of the peace and other person-to-person contact will be discouraged. Please do your best to avoid engaging in handshakes, hugs, and similar greetings that break social distancing protocols and engage in verbal greetings or gestures, such as waving to celebrate our coming together, good health, and abundant life with which God has blessed us.

To further provide for a touchless experience, you may be encouraged to continue mailing your tithes and offerings or utilize your church online giving platform. Food and beverage service should not be provided. Although, you may want to consider bringing your own. Just remember to refrain from sharing outside your immediate family who is worshipping with you in that socially distant circle. You may also be asked to refrain from entering the church building. And, portable restroom facilities and wash/hand sanitizing stations may be available. If they are not, access to restrooms may be limited and should be cleaned/sanitized regularly.

SAFETY IS PARAMOUNT

Meeting outdoors does not come without challenges. And, from the time you arrive, until the service has concluded, every measure should be considered to provide for the safety of everyone in attendance. Because some churches will utilize their parking areas for outdoor worship, parking may be a challenge. You may see additional volunteers directing traffic in and around your church. Please allow yourself additional time to move through this process and follow their directions.

Because you are meeting outdoors, there will undoubtedly be some confusion. People will be unloading their chairs, walking around the parking lot or adjacent worship area, and making every attempt to adhere to the instructions being provided. This means they may not be as focused on the movement of traffic. Those who generally require assistance during our normal worship services may need additional time and assistance to get situated. Remember to use additional caution as you enter, travel through, and exit the parking area.

TAKE COURAGE

While we may not understand the trials before us, God does. He has gone before us. Be strong and courageous as you face these trials and uncertainties. Know He “will be with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged” (Deuteronomy 31). And, celebrate your coming together in His name to worship.

Prayer of Good Courage

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

--Eric Milne- White, Kings College, Cambridge
