

May 1, 2020 – Friday of the Third Week of Easter

Dearest Saints in Jesus Christ, the Risen Lord,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ, who is coming soon (Revelation 22:20).

On Monday, April 27, shortly after I finished my latest pastoral letter to you, Governor Reynolds announced that she was going to be easing some restrictions on certain organizations throughout the state of Iowa. Some businesses, including restaurants, libraries, fitness centers, retail stores, and others can open at 50% capacity with certain restrictions. Other businesses and events could once again continue with other strict limits in place, like having no more than 10 people gathered at once. Most important for us was the Governor's lifting of restrictions on the gathering sizes for worship services.

This caught many of us off guard. In the days before and after the Governor's announcement, the number of confirmed cases in Iowa have continued to be quite high. (As I am writing this, Governor Reynolds announced over 700 new cases today alone. The increase in testing certainly plays some part in this, but does not explain it in its entirety). In addition, the daily numbers of deaths continue to increase. Many models still have the state of Iowa 'peaking' sometime in mid-May or later. Another reason that it caught us off guard was that many people have misunderstood the Governor's allowance for churches. It is not a blanket allowance of any number of people with no restrictions or guidelines. The Governor's easing of limitations comes with at least three important caveats. First, churches should continue to limit numbers in their gatherings as much as possible, urging especially at-risk individuals to remain home. Second, churches can gather together only if proper social distancing is observed. Third, churches may hold services if they increase proper sanitation (sanitizing and cleaning).

This sounds simple. But, there are many details that go into following these guidelines. Even more, the reality is that cases of the novel coronavirus are still increasing in Iowa, and continue to creep closer to our area, which has, up till now, largely been spared.

With all this in mind, the Church Council met virtually on Tuesday April 28 to discuss our path forward. We are unanimous that though the Governor has allowed gatherings does not mean that we *must* begin gathering immediately. Instead, we will be making decisions that are both smart and prudent for our own context and circumstances. Over the next week, we will be formulating a plan to address the size of our gatherings, proper social distancing procedures, and the necessity for increased sanitation. When that plan is in place, we will distribute it to the members of the congregation.

Please understand that whatever the leadership of the congregation decides is necessary for the safety of our members *must* be taken seriously. Some of the restrictions may seem burdensome – even unnecessary – to some of you. But, the virus is nothing to mess around with. While we Christians refuse to live in fear, we will also not test God by pretending as if the virus is not a problem. It is a danger, even to those who are otherwise healthy and strong. As more and more information comes out, we now understand that cough and fever might be the least of the symptoms of COVID-19. Therefore, we do not want to put anyone at unnecessary risk.

For now, the church leadership has decided that the first two Sundays in May (May 3 and May 10) will continue as online services only. Pastor will be in contact with the Elders, and the Church Council will meet virtually again next week to assess the situation. If we have a plan in place that allows for safe (albeit smaller) gatherings, than worship services may begin on May 17 in some form. If not, in-person worship will be postponed to a later date.

One final note: whenever we do resume services, please ***do not feel guilty*** about not coming if you are not able or do not feel comfortable. If you are at high risk, please remain at home and watch the live-stream online. If you do not feel comfortable for any reason, stay home and take advantage of the video until you do feel comfortable. Pastor will continue not only streaming the services and offering devotions, but checking in through phone calls and email. We want everyone to be safe and to have the opportunity to hear God's Word and receive his gifts as they are able. God is a God of peace and not of fear! May he give you that peace through his Holy Spirit!

Your brother in Christ,  
Pastor Squire