



Public Worship and Public Health, May 23, 2020

“...they saw the signs which he was performing on those who were sick.” John 6:2

Moving into a third month of churches meeting online, this seems to be taking a long time. Looking at the Gospels though, we see how much Jesus cared about the people’s physical health. We see Jesus caring about people with health challenges: hearing, seeing, walking, and bleeding, some with their behavioral conditions, even some near death. Jesus faced conflict many times because of his compassion for the health of individuals and communities. While we miss getting together in person, the church for these past two months has kept showing the love of Christ, trying to do our part to save lives and promote good health. As a church, we glorify God with our concern for others and one another.

Entering this Memorial Day weekend, the nation approaches 100,000 deaths due to Covid-19, enough to fill the largest football stadium. Thank you for helping slow the spread of the virus. We are aware that congregations are thinking about when to resume meeting in person for worship. This letter includes several concerns and resources for the process.

Both Oregon and Idaho have started lifting restrictions intended to slow the spread of Covid-19.

Idaho started its Stage 2 of reopening on May 16. With the addition of Marion and Polk, **Oregon** has now approved all counties except those in the Portland metro area for Phase 1.

Idaho can have gatherings of **up to 50** people (until Stage 4). **Oregon** will allow **gatherings of up to 25** people in approved counties, with this limit expected to continue through September.

You have heard that **“just because it’s legal, doesn’t make it a good idea.”** Each congregation needs to make its own careful decision. The virus doesn’t give us a pass for running low on patience, for majority vote or for being mad at the government. Congregations have not been spared. In deciding, we must consider many factors:

- How many members have underlying health conditions that could make them especially vulnerable to the virus? How many live with vulnerable persons?
- What safety practices (distancing, cleaning, masks, reservations) will the church use? Will people follow the rules? [Note: masks are a sign of love for neighbor to prevent

infection and not just to protect yourself. They do not show lack of faith any more than if you use a smoke detector or a seat belt]

- Does the church have enough supplies and people to do all the extra cleaning?
- Have you looked at reliable sources of public health information for your area? *With this link, you can click on a map of your state and then your county for local numbers.*
https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/national/coronavirus-us-cases-deaths/?itid=lb_coronavirus-what-you-need-to-read_2
- What if someone wants to come who really should stay home? What about those who deny the need for safety measures? Will everyone present have good health insurance?

Some Disciples congregations in Idaho and Oregon have decided to wait several weeks after the beginning of each next step before implementing a change. This will allow careful planning and observation of what happens in other congregations as they make changes. Due to the number of seniors or other vulnerable members, some congregations have decided to delay meeting in person indefinitely. Some are looking to gather in limited groups during June.

Please give some thought to the potential legal and liability issues.

- 1) You may want to ask your insurance provider about how your coverage affects the decision for meeting in person. Doug has spoken with our Insurance Board agent and our attorney and can schedule a time to talk with you.
- 2) Common safety standards may be hard to find due to the differences between federal, state and county guidelines, or the lack of these guidelines. Political issues and threats of litigation may inhibit some government sources from requiring or sharing the best practices of public health professionals. CDC released these guidelines on May 22:
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/faith-based.html>
- 3) Insurers may soon begin to add exclusions to policies saying that claims resulting from the pandemic are not covered.
- 4) Church employees who become infected on the job may need to file a workers' compensation claim.
- 5) If your congregation is covered by Insurance Board, we have already spoken with the agent and can share with you about that. Two Insurance Board resources can be found attached to the regional mailing connected to this letter.

In summary, please prayerfully consider the following when deciding when to resume meeting in person:

- Information from reliable public health sources who know your area. We recommend that you document and continually monitor the rates of infection and other data for your immediate area whenever public worship resumes.
- The health of your congregation, staff and their households.
- Issues of liability and insurance coverage.
- The greater public good in your area and beyond.

- Ability of your congregation to do adequate cleaning and to follow best practices for preventing spread of the virus by asymptomatic people (about 35-40% of infections).
- Risks and benefits of starting sooner vs. later.
- Starting slowly when you first begin to meeting again (small groups, worship in person less than once a week, meeting outdoors vs. indoors).
- Remember that without a vaccine and without testing for most of us, prevention measures are our only defense.

Congregations need to plan as though the Covid-19 numbers could go up again. This may happen as people stay home less, as they travel long distances more, or as the seasons change. Any plan for resuming public worship needs to have a plan for considering when to stop meeting again in the future if necessary and how that decision might be made by the congregational leadership.

The Christian Church in the Southwest has invited Disciples from all regions to join a webinar (limit of 500) next Tuesday on the issues related to re-gathering for worship in person. You can access that webinar by signing up:

Re-Entering Worship Spaces Webinar

May 26, 2020 10:00 AM Central Time (US and Canada)

Register in advance for this webinar:

https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_yNsOgC52QCmg4QGhhDEGcg

After registering, you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the webinar.

With the College of Regional Ministers, we have decided not to travel and to continue working mostly from home for the time being. Since we live in the part of Oregon currently most affected by the pandemic, visiting other areas now would not be advised.

In closing, we share a thought from Barry Lind, Pastor at Northwood Christian Church in Springfield. Barry sent in a video greeting recently that in all the time of staying at home, the church has never been closed. The ministries of Christ keep going through God's people, as we serve faithfully each day. We are grateful that this is true in each of the churches of the Oregon SW Idaho region.

Doug Wirt and Cathy Myers Wirt, Regional Ministers