

COVID Pastoral Update

June 19, 2020

We want to give a pastoral update on what has happened, what we are doing and what we are looking forward to in the future. It has been quite a while since we've all been gathered together in this room, or even in this building, to worship, to fellowship, to laugh and enjoy being a faith community.

This has been a difficult and challenging few months for all of us, and on different levels. Times of celebration, like graduations, weddings, trips and birthday parties have been cancelled or postponed. Times of coming together to mourn and grieve the passing of our loved ones have been put off until later times. We miss gathering as a church for worship, fellowship and service together.

As we begin to think about restarting in-person worship, it is important to remember where we've come from. We initially stopped in-person worship back in March out of a desire to protect the most vulnerable in our community and faith family. A new virus means that there is no immunity, there is also much that is unknown. So, our goal in moving to online worship was to help our state and local health officials and hospitals prepare. It was out of a love for others and demonstrating the love of Jesus.

While we may have stopped in-person worship in this building, we don't need to talk about reopening the church, because the church was never closed. Let's remember that Sunday Services are but one part of our life as a faith community. As a church we've continued to serve our community, to give to our mission agencies, to look for ways to encourage faith formation and discipleship, we've had people caring for one another through letters, phone calls, Zoom meetings, our leadership groups have continued to meet. Yes, we've all missed singing together, eating meals together, and fellowshiping together, but we haven't stopped being the church – or at least we shouldn't have.

Rick Warren was recently quoted as saying, "Our buildings have been closed, but the church is not a building! We're a living, breathing body. The church is a family, not a fortress! We are a people, not a place! We're an army of servants, not an event of attenders. The church is so much more than a weekend service! The church operates 168 hours a week!"

When we went to our online worship format, we never thought that in June we'd still be worshipping this way. The first few months of this pandemic saw us frantically reacting to what was happening in the world, and adjusting our activities and services. We were functioning from a reactive posture, as we learned how to stream services, what we could stream, and figure out how to communicate with people.

Now, as we look forward, we hope to be moving from this reactionary postures, to one where we can intentionally plan and be proactive in our approach to worship, faith formation and pastoral care. Part of our intentional planning includes our goal of returning to some forms of in-person worship.

Our recent worship survey had 101 and one responses, and we are grateful for each response and the feedback that was given. The results of the survey were predictably varied – we have people who plan to continue to worship online for the foreseeable future. We have a number of people who wonder why we aren't already meeting in person for worship. One of the strengths of Whitestone has been its diversity, but our encouragement is that we don't let our diversity divide us. Conversations around reopening, masks, and whatever else, have become political and partisan, which is a shame and

unfortunate. We will seek to make our decisions guided by the Holy Spirit and a love for our neighbor, both now and in the future.

That said, we are excited to announce our plan for **ReConnect June**, which is an invitation for those who would like to come on Sunday morning and gather in the front lawn or front parking lot for worship. This Sunday, June 21st and next Sunday June 28th will be the first two Sunday's that we try this new way to worship.

Here are a few details about what this will look like:

- Individuals and families are encouraged to bring blankets or chairs and spread out in the front lawn. Please observe the six feet of distance, and plan to use your own device to watch the livestream. We are still working out the kinks with WI-FI, so we can't guarantee great coverage and signal strength this week, but we are hopeful that next week we'll have this improved. If you have data plans that allow you to livestream, it might be good to use that this week!
- The church building will still be closed, except for those who are leading the service, and their families who have been invited to join for worship inside.
- Bring your own coffee or morning drinks, we won't have a coffee bar for a while yet!
- If the weather is bad, stay home, or you can sit in your car.
- We hope this can be an option for people who would like an in-person worship experience, but who are not comfortable being in an indoor space.

We are excited for this initial step towards in person worship! It important for us to see each other, to worship and sing together, and to gather as a body again. Our livestream will start at 10:15 AM, like normal – and we hope you can join us for worship either on the lawn or online.

We also plan to give regular updates as we seek to find a new normal and will be changing and adapting as the situation changes around us. Thanks for your continued prayers and patience in this process!

Thank you,

Pastors Steve, Ron, and Isaac