

Saint Luke's Presbyterian Church

Guiding Principles During the Coronavirus Pandemic

(Adopted Unanimously by the Saint Luke's Session - April 26, 2020)

*One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.
For God will shelter me in the day of trouble;
hide me in his tent, and set me up high, safe on a rock.
I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.
Hope in the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the Lord! (from Psalm 27, NRSV and CEB)*

While we remain safely sheltering-in-place at home, we also yearn to return to church gathering together. While essential in-person activity and work has continued around us, and more is being opened up, we naturally think about when the time will become right to “re-open church.”

In consideration of return, Saint Luke's will be taking our cues from the virus, health science, and our particular context and calling. We continue to learn more from public health scientists about transmission, protection, and safe gathering practices when they will become possible again. This much, however, is already clear: the possibility of safely gathering again, for intergenerational communities like ours, will emerge slowly, and return to gathering will be necessarily cautious and gradual in phases.

This policy lays out what we know, what we reasonably expect, and how we will be guided in decision making about return to in-person activity at Saint Luke's.

General Guidelines About Gatherings and Return to Our Building and Customs:

1. **As Christians, with God we prioritize the health and wellness of all God's people, sharing Jesus' special concern for those who are most vulnerable and marginalized.**
2. **As Christians we share a particular calling, and as a proud intergenerational and inclusive church, we are a particular kind of community organization that must be “necessarily cautious.”** We are not a business or a restaurant or a school. We have a particular call to give special attention in our decision making to the needs of those especially susceptible to coronavirus, including seniors, people with compromised immune systems, and those with respiratory and cardiac conditions. If gathering in person puts people at serious risk, even if it is not the people who are gathering, we must refrain from doing so.
3. **The work of the church continues, and even continues to grow, as we wait to return.** Thankfully, by the work of the Spirit, we do not forego our mission during this time of change. As the apostle Peter reminds us, “Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5). The church is not the building, or even gathering in person, it is the people of God loving in the way of Jesus. During the suspension of gathering, we have discovered new ways to fulfill our mission that are transforming our church for the better and will be here to stay.
4. **Until there is minimal community spread, a coronavirus cure or vaccination, gatherings of the whole congregation together as we are accustomed are uncertain.** Other hopeful developments like anti-viral medication, should they be realized, could also serve to mitigate the risks associated with gathering.

5. **Therefore, our gathering in person will remain suspended, and the building and office will remain closed for non-essential use, through potentially July 31st, 2020.** This action and timeline are consistent with the guidance and model of the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta.
 - a. **The CDC suggests that gathering in person can be considered, with strict safe practices, when “community spread” becomes “minimal.”** When that becomes reliably measurable and demonstrable, the Session will consider a necessarily cautious and phased-in approach to gathering again.
 - b. **The Session will monitor and evaluate public health developments on a bi-weekly basis, next on May 8th.** David will communicate updates regarding the suspension end date every other week in the Friday "Staying Connected" churchwide email.
 - c. **This will regrettably mean canceling summer trips and gatherings like Vacation Bible School.** Some summer trips have already been canceled by our mission partners, and it is likely others will follow.
 - i. As summer trips are so vitally important to our youth program, alternative experiences will be developed for our youth to learn and grow together. For more information
 - ii. As our mission trip experiences are vital to our outreach ministry and to our mission partners, we will seek alternative ways to support the work of our partners.
 - iii. Vacation Bible School will instead be offered in alternative form during the fall.
 - d. **We will continue to be a growing and loving church in the ways we have available for now.** Sunday services, Sunday school, bible studies, prayer circles, youth groups, small groups and committees will continue to meet online.
 - e. **Church pastors and staff will continue to work remotely.**
 - f. **The building will remain closed except for essential activities, like hosting Family Promise.** The building will not be available for hosting large public gatherings like weddings, graduations, or memorial services.
 - g. **There will be allowable uses of the building and columbarium to accommodate important and timely pastoral needs, provided they are small, socially distant, and safe. Celebrating life and ministering to the grieving are essential to our mission.**
 - i. The Wisconsin Council of Churches has produced a very pastorally-sensitive and useful set of [Guidelines for Christian Funerals](#), to which we will turn for safe and meaningful strategies when working with grieving families.
6. **There is likely a time upcoming between now and a return to large public gathering where a safe and stepwise approach, beginning with sanitary and safely distant small groups, can enable us to begin some gathering together.**
 - a. **After at least several consecutive weeks of improving public health conditions, and upon authorization of the Session, Saint Luke’s can consider small in-person gatherings that will require careful observance of social distancing recommendations, including strict sanitation and prevention measures.**
 - i. As a fulfillment of the responsibility we have taken on for our Family Promise guests, careful consideration of the health of those staying at Saint Luke’s will be required, and their protection will need to be a priority until our guests can safely relocate.
 - ii. A gradual approach toward gathering can also be considered for church building partners, provided they agree to and strictly adhere to all safe conditions of use.
 - iii. Provided safe standards can be met in doing so, regular office functions could begin to resume, with staff and visitors maintaining social distancing and strict sanitation and

- prevention measures. The World Health Organization has published guidelines for [“Getting Your Workplace Ready for COVID-19”](#) that are specific and useful.
- iv. In consideration of any such returns to gathering, as health science continues to develop, we will rely on the [latest guidance from the CDC](#) for setting safe parameters.
- b. A thoughtful and useful step-wise, phased-in approach to [“Returning to Church”](#) has been outlined by the Wisconsin Council of Churches, which identifies and describes three phases, each triggered by a significant measurable and demonstrable improvement in public health and community spread.**
- i. PHASE ONE: worship online possibly recording from the sanctuary, bible studies and small groups continue online, life ritual gatherings like weddings and funerals kept to 10 or fewer, office and building uses can be reconsidered with strict sanitation and protection measures in place, high risk individuals continue to shelter in place.
 - ii. PHASE TWO: worship online continues with consideration for worship in small groups, mix of online and in person small group offerings with strict sanitation and protection measures in place, life ritual gatherings like weddings and funerals kept to 50 or fewer, church office and building use can resume if kept small and safe, high risk individuals continue to shelter in place.
 - iii. PHASE THREE: worship gathering can be considered with safe practices and also made available online, bible studies and small groups can consider gathering safely again, church office and building use can consider expanding safely, safe pastoral care visits can resume, meetings can be considered safely.

The CDC continues to recommend, as articulated by the Executive Presbyter of the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta, “No matter what happens in the business sector and community-at-large, it is imperative for congregations and houses of worship to continue to refrain from large gatherings until a congregation can find a way to do so in a way that keeps people safe and can keep up the proper health standards in the midst of the COVID-19. This means that churches cannot rush to go back to church business as usual.”

As advised by our health, community, and denominational authorities, we expect a very slow and gradual return toward something that will not resemble church business exactly as we have known it. But this time is far more than waiting. It is active fulfillment of our mission in different ways, and it is preparing us for the next good things God will do with us. As we long for and consider a return to our building and customs, we will be who we have always been in the name of Christ: deliberate, guided by principle, vigilant about wellness, prioritizing of the vulnerable, and praying and working for the recovery of the community and world.

*“You are no longer strangers and aliens,
but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God,
built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets,
with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.
In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord;
in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”
(Ephesians 2:19-22 NRSV)*

Supporting Resources:

[“Returning to Church,” Wisconsin Council of Churches.](#)
[COVID-19: Executive Presbyter Letter in Response to Reopening Georgia](#)
[CDC Interim Guidance for Administrators and Leaders of Community- and Faith-Based Organizations to Plan, Prepare, and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#)
[World Health Organization: Getting your workplace ready for COVID-19](#)
[“A Guide for Christian Funerals During COVID-19,” Wisconsin Council of Churches](#)

Additional Scriptural Reflections:

*“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.
No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.
You are my friends if you do what I command you.” (John 15:12-14)*

*“I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.
I keep the Lord always before me; because God is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.
Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure.
For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit.
You show me the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness of joy....” (Psalms 16:7-10)*

*“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” (Isaiah 43:18-19)*

*“The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king forever.
May the Lord give strength to his people!
May the Lord bless his people with peace!” (Psalms 29:10-11)*

Additional Background:

The Coronavirus pandemic has caused everyone on earth to sacrifice customs and comforts for the sake of public health, particularly for those most vulnerable to the virus. Making change and sacrifice for the sake of wellness, with particular attention to those most marginalized and vulnerable, was core to the ministry of Jesus himself. While the change and sacrifice asked of us during these uncertain times is significant, this is what we Christians do. We love one another as a reflection of the generous and sacrificial love given to us in Christ.

During this time of great concern, due to the global pandemic, as it has done during previous epidemics, Saint Luke’s has adapted its programming to include safe social-distance practices that emphasize relationship and compassion. *Responding to God’s astonishing grace*, we have been moved to *love God, love each other, and love our neighbors near and far* by sheltering in place and doing no harm with our activities. Saint Luke’s has suspended all activities of in-person gathering, and closed the building and church office, with all staff working remotely. Guided by our mission to love our neighbors, an exception has been made for Family Promise, who now offers socially distant shelter-in-place to its guests at Saint Luke’s, which we consider essential use of the building.

More specifically, we quickly aligned with the swift move toward a public consensus to shelter in place, while maintaining our sense of community, by moving many of our gatherings online, including public worship, Sunday school classes, Bible studies, small groups, youth groups, children’s classes, staff and committee meetings, and even some fellowship events. We have also developed meaningful new practices like daily check-ins, a calling ministry, weekly online prayer services, and safe pastoral care to expand and fulfill our mission during the pandemic. As a function of these efforts and the times, it seems we are reaching more people more regularly with support, good news, and hope. With the challenges of the times have come great opportunities to expand our reach and share love in important and relevant ways.

We are grateful for the blessings of online gathering and in them have discovered new and lasting opportunities for connecting and growing. That said, as Christians, we continue to believe that we are an organic body together and we function best when we are present with one another, and we yearn to return to the place and the people in whom we have found sanctuary and our better selves. At the same time, we see these same competing needs, feelings, and opinions playing out in the secular world where there is less public consensus about return to activity, as concerns about the economic and social consequences of sheltering-in-place intensify. While we at Saint Luke's certainly care deeply about economic recovery, as the present recession adversely affects so many people, especially the poor and marginalized, we also consider it part of our economic and spiritual responsibility to keep one another and the community as safe as possible. And so, while we are directed by the same forces that prevail on civic leaders, business owners, and individual workers, we are also guided by a different set of principles that create even greater complexities as we endeavor to make the best decisions we can for our church family. It is important, therefore, to clarify, drawing on the perspectives of our faith, our mission, and health science, our position on gatherings and when we will return to our building and customs.