

May 28, 2020

Dear Members and Friends of First Lutheran,

On behalf of our entire staff, we want to thank you all the ways you have remained flexible and faithful in these uncertain times.

We want you to know that even before the most recent executive orders by President Trump and Governor Walz, we have been working hard to develop a plan for moving forward in light of COVID-19 that is in line with First Lutheran's mission and in the best interest of our entire congregation. In developing that plan, our care for the well-being and safety of our members, as well as our staff, must be, and will remain, a priority.

Over the past weeks, First Lutheran leaders have consulted with multiple public health officials in order to stay updated on the latest virus information. Based on their advice, guidelines put out by the NWMN Synod, and discussion with the Vision Team, we will continue to provide quality worship and ministry opportunities online and over the radio for the foreseeable future. We are taking a phased approach to re-opening, as you can see by the accompanying chart. At this time, we are in the beginning stages of Phase 2 (see accompanying chart). Although we wish it were different, the reality is that public health officials consistently predict a long trajectory for this pandemic. We have not hit our peak in Douglas County, which projections say will happen in July.

While we all want to return to in-person worship, here are a few other things to consider:

Why are some things open, but not my church?

Religious gatherings are considered highly contagious events for several reasons. COVID-19 is a respiratory disease, spread by inhaling contagious air particles. The rate of transmission greatly increases when people are together for 15 minutes or longer. In light of that it is important to keep in mind all of our congregational members, leaders, and staff members who are in high-risk and vulnerable population categories, or who live with someone who is.

What would worship look like if we did gather in person?

According to state and CDC guidelines, which we are required to follow, worship attendance would be limited to 25% of the sanctuary's capacity, which would be 93 people. Upon arrival at church, your temperature would be taken, you would be required to wear a mask, and strict physical distancing would be enforced. During worship, there would be no congregational singing, and afterward, there would be no fellowship time, as we would not be able to serve coffee or food. Everyone would have to return to their cars immediately after worship concludes.

Isn't outdoor worship an option?

An important factor that we have to consider is the size of our congregation. Prior to the pandemic, over 800 people worshipped at First each week. Last summer, on average we had over 400 each week attending outdoor worship. When we have reached our newly enforced capacity, we would have to turn people away from worship, and that is something none of us

wants to do. There would also be no coffee or fellowship time, which was one of the things that made our outdoor worship last summer the incredible experience it was.

When will we be able to come “back” to church?

Congregational life and life in general will not be the same for some time. However, we do not have to allow that to limit who we are and how we live out our faith. We hope and pray that a vaccine and/or an effective treatment will be developed soon. In the meantime, our ministry continues. We remain committed to our core values:

- Providing meaningful, relevant worship and music that is joy-filled, authentic, and inspiring. At this time, we are reaching over 2800 each week.
- Nurturing vibrant, active faith in all seasons of life.
- Extending hospitality, building relationships, and walking alongside one another in times of need.

Without a doubt, the challenges before us are significant, but there is also no doubt that our Lord has given us the generosity, courage, and faith to meet those challenges. Our staff, our ministries, and our congregation are healthy. As you know, being the church is not defined by, nor limited to, our building. We will continue to worship, pray, serve one another, love our neighbor, and together, we will get through this. While our circumstances have changed, our mission to live out the good news of the gospel has not. Thank you for your support and prayers as we move forward.

As it says in Psalm 27, “I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!”

In Christ,
Pastors Greg, Kari, and Ben