

Immanuel Presbyterian Church COVID-19 Communication

FROM: Pastor Tad Monroe, Debby Davenport, Jeff Orr, Beth Prevo, the IPC session, and Affiliated Clergy (Rev. Jenny Rake-Marona & Rev. David Wright)

Intro

The staff here at IPC, along with the affiliated clergy, elders, and other leaders have been meeting to discuss our plan moving forward in light of the governor's phases for COVID-19, mandated procedures from the state, guidance from the local health department, and from our presbytery, denomination, and other ecclesiastical bodies.

I am grateful for the thoughtfulness of every person and the information that we have access to. We have looked at this through various lenses, including:

- **Public Health & Safety:** COVID-19 is not a hoax. Over 100,000 people have lost their lives just in the U.S. This is a pandemic and our first and foremost commitment and form of faithful response is to sacrifice our own comfort and preferences for the health and wellbeing of others. This is not fear, it is love.
- **Equity:** If we cannot all gather, then is it fair for some of us to gather? The first to "come back" to church may be those who are most "at risk" in this situation. At risk is generally defined as those that are 65 and older or who have pre-existing health conditions or compromised immune systems. We believe that our approach should allow for participation of all and not just some. We are in this together and our decisions must be equitable to all who are impacted.
- **Social Isolation:** While public health, safety and equity are of foremost concern, we have also taken seriously the impacts of social isolation which we have all likely experienced to some degree. While we do not believe we should take unnecessary risks to be "in-person" with each other, we should do what we can to safely meet in the ways that we can now and in the future.
- **The Goal is Not to Get Back to Normal but to Figure Out How to be the Church within this New Reality:** This pandemic has changed things. We are now living in a new reality and even once a vaccine is available, this new reality will be with us. There will likely be other viruses and communicable diseases. Our goal is to not get back to "normal" but rather to ask, "how can we best be the church in this new reality?" This is an opportunity to examine what we do and how we do it and to continue to use our creativity to forge something new together. It is an exciting time!
- **The church never closed:** IPC has not closed. The church is not about a building. The church is not just about Sunday morning. We say we believe this, but in the last few months we have proven it. We could argue that church "attendance" and "participation" have gone up based on the numbers we are seeing, and that people have more access than ever to be a part of our community and mission. It is clear that there is a place for both in-person gathering and virtual gathering that strengthens our mission. The church has not closed because you are all caring for

each other, your family, neighbors, and friends. That engagement is the church outside the walls.

- **Pragmatism & Capacity:** The guidelines for larger public gatherings are quite onerous. We must look at those requirements and ask the question – where is the best place to put our time and energy? Should we put our time into making this happen for some or creating more and better opportunities for all via small group and virtual gatherings? We only have so much time and energy and we must consider what is the best use of that time and energy. We have leaned towards prioritizing that which allows everyone to participate during this time in the safest way possible.

Our Suggested Plan Moving Forward

Sunday Worship & Other Large Group Gatherings: We will continue to record worship until we get to Phase 4. Once we hit Phase 4 or shortly before we do – we will reconvene to look at the data and information and recommendations that are out there. This is the soonest that we could gather with our whole congregation during Sunday worship based on our size and capacity. Now that we are in Phase 2, we may begin recording our services in the sanctuary again (exact date TBD).

When we do begin to gather again, some things will be different. Practicing social distancing. Limiting music to smaller ensembles. Wearing and singing in masks. No passing the peace. No hand collection of the offering. Figuring out a way to do communion safely. Practicing strict self-quarantining when you are sick and have symptoms. Rigorous cleaning of the worship space and materials. These and others are all things we will likely need to consider when we gather again.

Programming: We are also going to continue to meet virtually for our Adult Nurture offerings, men's and women's groups, choir, and most other adult-oriented programming. Most of these groups are well over five and generally over ten participants and should be open to all that want to attend. We will revisit this type of program when we get near to reaching Phase 3. Our exceptions to this based on current guidelines would be certain outdoor activities where physical distancing is easier to maintain, including hikes and possibly the golf tournament in August.

This does NOT mean you cannot gather with your friends from the church on your own time, following the existing guidelines and requirements. In fact, we encourage that, if you are practicing social distancing, wearing your masks, providing sanitizer and practicing hand washing, doing "BYOB" with food and drink, and so forth. These are not "church sponsored" events, but they are part of being the church. We also ask that you are particularly aware of your safety if you are more "at-risk." We love you and want you to be safe, but these are of course personal decisions for each of you. We encourage these same activities with your non-church friends, neighbors, and family. This is another way we are "the church" to one another and the world.

Children & Youth: The same guidelines for children's programming as the above. The CYFM committee has met and is considering various ways to continue to gather our children, youth, and families virtually and in small groups and possibly some larger outdoor activities if and when we transition into Phase 3. Our normal Wild Goose Adventures is cancelled this year but look for new opportunities in the next couple of weeks to be unveiled for the summer. Prime Time has already moved only to virtual

gatherings and they are at the end of their program year and will be taking their normal break for the summer to prepare for the upcoming program year.

Deacons & Pastoral Care: Now that we are in Phase 2, we will be ramping up our one-to-one in-person visits, while still encouraging those who are “at-risk” to keep visiting virtually. When we do visit, we will NOT be doing so if we show any symptoms of sickness. We will be wearing masks (and possibly gloves), practicing social distancing, and so forth. We will likely carry these precautions forward for the foreseeable future – at least until there is a vaccine but maybe beyond, because it is simply good practice when visiting those who’s health may already be compromised.

Church Business Meetings: Session, deacons, and other work committees will be encouraged to meet virtually until Phase 3 at least, but if these groups are 5 people or less they can meet under the same guidelines we have already addressed if meeting in an indoor space, or 10 or less in an outdoor space.

Promoting Small Group Gathering: Some of you are in on-going Food for Thought groups, Community Circle groups, or informal small groups. If you are not, we want to really encourage you to think about joining or creating one. We are open to organizing more groups for those who are interested or supporting you in your efforts to create one. These groups can meet virtually which would be our preference. But could meet outdoors with groups of 10 or less, or indoors with groups of 5 or less. Again, following all the same guidelines already referenced. This is a great way to connect while mitigating risks. If you have interest and are not already connected, let us know at the church office!

We want to hear from you!

In the coming days, a short survey will be going out so that you can share about your personal situation, needs, and desires. The survey will be focused on finding out how you are doing? What your greatest needs and interests are during this time? How can the church best serve you during this time? What do you want to see us carry forward into the future? And so forth.

In addition, if you want to share your thoughts, feelings, and ideas with the session and staff you can email me Pastor Tad at 253tad@ipctacoma.org with your feedback or to set up a time for a phone conversation. Feel free to reach out to other staff or current session members as well. We are in this together and it is important that you all know that your feedback and perspectives on our approach during COVID and beyond are valued and desired.

List of Resources:

[Safe Start – Washington State](#)
[Phase One & Two Faith Based and Religious Organization Requirements](#)
[Tacoma Pierce County Health Department COVID Info](#)
<http://www.olympres.org/covid19-toolbox>