



14 May 2020

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

In this time of separation, I have missed your smiling faces, your warm handshakes, and your loving hugs. I have missed our fellowship, our learning together, and the many ways we express love tangibly in the church.

Even with all the changes in the world around us, I celebrate the many ways we continue to build life-changing relationships through and with God. We have celebrated drive-by birthdays, filled bud vases for isolated moms at the Arbors, and offered carloads of food to feed our neighbors through Sylvania Area Family Services. Our methods have changed out of necessity, but we are still sharing our faith by loving our neighbors in the 419. We are the church, and we continue to do God's business.

We have heard much recently about reopening the economy and getting back to business. I'm writing to share with you our plan for taking our first, tentative, and careful steps as a church toward regathering.

What I need to say first and most clearly is this: church as we have known it cannot be the same as it was. We can't just "go back to normal" in this time of COVID-19. To do so would endanger not only lives within the congregation, but all whose lives we touch. This is a great and heavy grief for me, and I'm sure for you as well.

Let me share an illustration of why we need to be so careful. In the early days of the pandemic, a church choir with 60 members gathered for rehearsal in Washington State. They were careful about social distancing. They did not shake hands or hug. They sat six feet apart in a room the size of our fellowship hall. They were careful. They did everything "right" according to the best standards at the time. One asymptomatic choir member was present for the 2½-hour rehearsal. Using contact tracing, it was determined that 45 of the 60 choir members contracted COVID-19 from that encounter, and two died.

When we gather for worship, what is the No. 1 thing we love to do? Many of you will say, “Sing!” We’re United Methodists. We love to sing, but it turns out singing is a sure way of spreading the novel coronavirus, even if everyone who has symptoms stays home and we all remain six feet apart. Until a vaccine is widely available, we simply cannot gather in large groups to worship in the same way that we have.

I want to pause here and grieve that with you. Nothing stirs me more than corporate worship. Nothing fills my heart more than being the body of Christ with you, singing our praises together. There will be a day when we can gather as a full communion, and I will pray with you for it to come sooner, but in the meantime I want to invite you to release your nostalgia for what was, and to imagine with me how we could become a new kind of church together.

The first thing to note is that **online worship is here to stay**. Even when we are able to gather in the sanctuary as a full community, we will continue to offer an online connection. Already our worship attendance is up 25-30% from pre-pandemic, in-person levels, and those are only the people we can count from online engagement. Many more may be worshipping with us on Facebook who we have not been able to track fully. This has given us a new avenue for sharing the gospel and helping people find a renewed relationship with Christ and the church. That is a win for the Kingdom!

So if online worship will continue and we cannot gather in the way we’d prefer, what can we safely do to experience being church together? One thing you might have noticed over the last few weeks is that we are posting on our website and emailing **Worship at Home** resources that invite families to experience worship together around the dinner table or in your own homes. These experiences can even be shared among friends in different households by calling or video conferencing with one another. The resources are intended to help Sunday’s worship emphasis deepen and take root with us during the week. We see in the book of Acts how the early church grew not by bringing people to a single building, but through worship in homes. In this season, we’re learning again how to return to our roots.

As restrictions begin to be lifted and we’re allowed to gather in groups up to 50, we’re inviting you to experience church differently by gathering outside as small **Neighborhood Churches**. We are just beginning to organize this effort by recruiting leaders who will start by calling every church member in their neighborhood or area to check in, to see if there’s anything you need, and to pray with you. Over time, these Neighborhood Churches might gather by Zoom to get to know one another as a group and, when the time is right and restrictions are lifted, we may gather outside in a nearby

park or cul-de-sac to experience being church together through a worshipful experience, or by doing something together to care for our neighbors. This is the way the early Methodists worshiped, which would make me a new kind of circuit rider coming around to different groups over time to offer a word from scripture, an experience of sharing communion together and, of course, a blessing. Just imagine how our impact on our community could be magnified by sharing life together in this new way. Do you have neighbors who might come to this kind of backyard or park gathering who might not yet be ready to come to the church building? This is a Kingdom-building opportunity to be good neighbors and to bless our neighborhoods.

Many of you are aware that we are becoming more active through **social media** too. This is another way we are connecting with people in our community and sharing words of encouragement and hope. If you're not yet connected with us, "friend" Sylvania First on Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook! And if you are connected with us, share our posts when they move you. That helps get the word out about what kind of faith community we are.

We are also developing a new website for discipleship called **Make a Splash**. We'll let you know when it's ready to roll out, but as a preview, you'll be able to find things you can do to deepen your life with God based on the amount of time you have available.

Finally, we're hoping to regather for **S'more Church** on the front lawn this summer. Again, we're waiting for it to be safer to gather in larger groups, but when the word is given, we'll have our campfire, graham crackers, chocolate bars, and marshmallows ready! There may be other outdoor opportunities to gather in the summer too. When they arise, you'll be the first to know.

If you're counting, that's six ways we can begin to gather, and as we do, I'm convinced we'll discover what it means to be church together in a new way. I'm also convinced that God will bless and multiply our efforts so that our church has a greater Kingdom impact on Sylvania as we embody our mission: *Building life-changing relationships through and with God*. If we embrace the opportunities of this season to become a different kind of church rather than just lamenting that we can't be the kind of church we used to be, our community will be changed for the better, and we will be too.

When I was a kid, I used to fold my hands and say the prayer, "Here's the church and here's the steeple. Open it up and here are all the people." When we talk about the church, we often mean the building, but that's not what the church was in the New Testament. The Bible teaches that the church is the people. We are the church. In this

letter I've outlined the first steps we're taking to move forward. There will be many more as conditions evolve. We will develop safety protocols for using the facility with groups sized appropriately according to health department guidelines. In prayerful consultation with the West Ohio Conference, national church leaders, and our own church council, we are charting this new course for our congregation because we are trying to learn what God is teaching us in this season about being a church that is poised and ready to step boldly into a post-Covid-19 future.

There will be a day when we are able to gather as a full worshipping community again, and I can't wait. In the meantime, I invite you to continue worshipping with us online and to engage with our at-home worship resources. When the invitation comes, please connect with your neighbors for neighborhood church. Engage with us on social media; we're having a lot of fun there these days. When the Make a Splash website is ready and we're ready for S'more Church, we'll let you know that too. Most of all, know that you are in my prayers. I miss you and look forward to seeing you as soon as we are able.

Grace and Peace,

Pastor Tom

