

Note from Pastor Matt (10/23/20)

Dear City Reformed,

We are moving forward with plans for the next couple of months. Here are some important updates:

1.) Worship Services

- a. On Sunday, November 8, we will hold our **Sunday PM Communion Service *inside* the WT building**. The two services will continue to be held at 5:00 pm and 6:00 pm. No advance sign-ups are needed. The service will continue to be 25-30 mins long, with plenty of room for everyone to spread out. [See Appendix A for more explanation.]
- b. We are evaluating plans for when/how we can restart our nursery and in-person **children's ministry**. We understand the important role this will have in allowing families to participate more fully in our ministry, and we seek to balance that with the many health guidelines that accompany this sort of ministry. We don't envision being able to restart this until we enter the new year.
- c. In-person attendance for **the morning service is continuing** to increase as we evaluate our use of the space. We are currently capping our sign-ups at 90 people. Most weeks there has been plenty of room, so [sign up HERE](#), and come join us in person.
- d. *Reminder:* Our host for the in-person worship services, Winchester Thurston, has developed a building use plan that they believe helps them maintain safety for the students that use the building during the week. As a result, they require everyone who enters the building to complete a [health survey](#). This should be completed on the Sunday you are attending in-person. It is not long, nor is it particularly cumbersome, but **our host requires that we ask everyone who attends to complete [this survey](#)**.

2.) A Season for Fasting

Most years, our church-wide Thanksgiving Dinner is one of the highlights on the church calendar. But 2020 is not like most years. To begin with, there doesn't seem to be a realistic plan for how we could gather to share a meal together with our entire church community. But, on further reflection, 2020 has been a year that highlights our need for grace to sustain us. Of course, there are still many things to be thankful for... but as we evaluate the biblical alternatives of celebratory *feasting* and dependent *fasting*, it seems like a fast is more in order than a feast.

While the Reformed theological tradition does not establish set days for fasting in the church calendar, it maintains that fasting can be a very effective tool for churches to use when they want to highlight a season of prayer and focus for a particular need. **The elders of City Reformed have decided to ask our congregation to join us for a day of fasting and prayer from Saturday, November 21 through evening worship on Sunday November 22.** We will pray for God to enliven his church and bring healing to the communities around us.

The boundaries of the fast are meant to be *after* dinner on Saturday until dinner on Sunday. Those who are able to join us for the communion service Sunday night will essentially break their fast with the Lord's Supper. Afterward, you can head off to eat – perhaps with other members – in ways that you deem to be safe and healthy. This sort of “dinner-to-dinner fast” is a less onerous practice for those who are not used to fasting, but it can still be a very effective tool to highlight a season of prayer and dependence. [See Appendix B for more discussion on fasting.]

As we look back over the last year it seems fitting that we would do so with a spirit of quiet dependence, rather than boisterous celebration. This day of fasting is still almost a month away, but it seems certain that our need for prayer and dependence will be even greater then. As we head into the winter months, the

constraints of COVID restrictions will get harder and the rate of infection may increase. Our country will be picking up the pieces after a contentious election and we will all be wrestling with how we can reestablish our civic bonds of fraternity. But, Christians are not meant to experience these external realities independent of God. Our God is ruling over nature and he is ruling over the nations. We know that he works in all things for our good – even when the purpose is to humble us and strip our false sources of security.

Right now, Americans have more reason to be insecure than any time in my recent memory. But *Christians* in America can know for certain that our God is in control, that he is able to care for us, and that our most difficult moments are places where we can turn to him with renewed faith for spiritual growth. Consider the following verses from first Peter chapter 5, remembering that fasting is a biblical practice of humility and dependence.

“Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you,⁷ casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you...¹⁰ And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.” -1 Peter 5:6-7,10

In Christ,



Pastor Matt

Appendix A: Worship Service Changes

Last summer, City Reformed had been moving toward a return to an open morning worship service on July 5, when infection numbers spiked in our County and we were forced to “pivot” to a new strategy. That strategy included gradually increasing our AM service attendance, starting an outdoor evening service where we served communion, and encouraging lots of smaller group outside activity. The arrival of cooler weather this fall will force us to alter some parts of that plan which relied so heavily on outdoor gatherings.

It is not easy to determine how to best meet while concerns about COVID infections still swirl in the background. “Gathering together” is an essential expression of our Christian faith (Heb 10:25), but we seek to do this in ways that show appropriate concern for the health of our members and our neighbors. We also know that our members have varying levels of risk and various levels of comfort in public settings. We have chosen to move forward by trying to carefully observe basic CDC guidelines about masking, social distancing, and basic sanitation. Our goal is to gather in ways that allow those who are most at risk to participate. We are fundamentally committed to have an open worship service every other week in the evening. We have seen that keeping our total size small with two services and keeping the service short have allowed significant participation from the congregation. While outdoor services are preferable to indoor services, we believe that keeping all other factors the same when we move indoors will allow us to gather with minimal risk. The auditorium at WT is a large and open space and conducive to meeting in a careful manner.

At the same time our Sunday AM service continues to grow. As we learn to use our space well, we can continue to expand those numbers also. The significant difference between the morning and the evening service is the length. For people who are uncomfortable wearing masks, or for people who find it difficult to keep their young children seated during the absence of childcare, a shorter service is easier to participate in.

During the next two months, we will be working hard to determine how and when we can resume Sunday morning children’ ministry. Until that time, we have a number of options that can help some families participate better. For

example, we have a cry room with livestream service and the service is also shown in the cafeteria area. If you would like to explore how your family could better participate in Sunday morning services, please discuss this with Charis.

charis@cityreformed.org

We understand that none of these options are ideal, and we eagerly look forward to the resumption of a more normal church life and ministry. Until then, we seek to walk forward as best we can in ways that preserve the unity of the body (Eph 4:1-7) and the essential elements of faithful Christian community growth. (Heb 10:19-25) We are thankful for the faithfulness and patience of our members and we continue to lean into your prayers and encouragement.

Appendix B: Fasting

While fasting has long been an important Christian practice, it tends to be less emphasized in modern churches. There is no doubt that some Christians have mistakenly thought of fasting as part of a work-righteousness approach to their spirituality – as if intentional suffering earns favor from God. But we can say that the misuse of fasting should not deter us from using this helpful discipline in the proper way.

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus warned against forms of spirituality that were done for an outward show for human approval, and he included prayer, fasting and charitable giving on this list of potentially misused activities. However, it is clear that prayer and giving remain important parts of the Christian life and after he corrected the wrong attitude on fasting, Jesus said, “When you fast... do it like this...” (Matt 6:16) This shows that fasting was meant to be part of Church life. Furthermore, while Jesus did not ask his disciples to fast during his earthly ministry, he did expect them to fast after he was crucified and raised into glory. (Matt 9:16) Therefore, it is not surprising that we would see the New Testament church fasting during important moments of ministry (Acts 13:2, 14:23). Conceptually, it is part of the larger command, found so often in Scripture, that we “humble ourselves before the Lord.” (1 Peter 5:8)

When we fast, we intentionally refrain from doing something that is otherwise good. Eating is a good part of God’s created world, and most biblical celebrations are joined with food. But when we fast, we are abstaining from a good part of God’s created world (food) to focus on something that is even more important – God and his purposes for us. Jesus said that those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness will be blessed.” (Matt 5:6) Fasting can link our physical experience of hunger to a spiritual desire to see God work for righteousness in the world. During his own extended period of fasting, Jesus remembered that “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” (Matt 4:4) When we fast, we are humbling ourselves before God, and remembering that our greater need is for his word to fill us, and for his Spirit to work righteousness in the world. Fortunately, we live at a time in history when few of us are unable to satisfy our hunger in the normal course of our lives. But when we fast, the physical feeling of hunger is a reminder that there are needs that we have that cannot be met in our own power, so we are reminded of our utter dependence upon God. As we move closer to this day of prayer and fasting, I will ask you to consider many things that we can be praying about together.

I recognize that some people may have a medical reason that makes fasting difficult or even unwise. During this time period you can participate by eliminating other elements of your normal routine for the purpose of focusing more attention on God. For example, it would likely be helpful for all of us to take a “fast” from the many forms of news, entertainment, and social media that flood our brains with constant information. A fast of this sort could benefit everyone, and may provide a way for some people with other restrictions to participate.