

Friday, July 3, 2020

Dear City Reformed,

When the Scottish poet Robert Burns overturned a nest of field mice with his plow he memorialized it with poetry, “The best laid plans of mice and men go oft awry.”

I don’t have a poem for you today, but it is apparent that our well laid plans¹ to reopen our worship service this coming Sunday... have been *overturned*. On Thursday afternoon, June 2, Allegheny County issued a one-week closure order². We have been scrambling to respond to that. At this point, all plans are (again) merely week to week. We will try to move forward in a way that is responsible, healthy, and maintains as much consistency as possible. Here are the details of our new plans for this coming Sunday:

- 1.) **We will postpone reopening our worship service. Instead, the Allegheny County closure order³ means that we will need to shift our focus and return our service to the protocols that we used during the yellow phase.⁴**
- 2.) **We will comply with the general call of the closure order and keep our service size below 25.⁵**
- 3.) **We will continue with our move to WT and hold our livestream service from there.**
- 4.) **We will continue our current masking policy for the worship services.⁶**

¹ If you are the kind of person who reads footnotes, then you will be the kind of person who would have appreciated how “well laid” and thorough our plans for reopening were. After an extended survey to track attendance patterns, we had developed detailed plans to ensure participation and safety. There were lots of really nice, laminated signs. We look forward to implementing these plans when our health situation allows for it.

² On July 2, Health Department Director Dr. Debra Bogen [announced a one-week closure](#) of bars, restaurants and casinos, and the cancellation of all activities or events over 25 people for that same one-week time period.

³ The Allegheny County closure order exempts churches. This is consistent with all of Pennsylvania’s orders which have chosen to honor our freedom for religious assembly. However, as we have previously noted, we wish to conduct ourselves in such a manner that shows our concern for our neighbors and respect for the governing authorities. **Gal. 5:13** *For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.*

⁴ I recognize that some members may be asking, “is this really necessary?” Truthfully, it is not easy to know. We have to respond quickly to uncertain orders with only partial knowledge of anything. What we do know is that the number of infections in Allegheny County are increasing rapidly. The resurgence of the Coronavirus after reopening has brought alarm nationally and now concerns have reached our region. The closure order by our county is a significant step and their direction to limit group sizes to below 25 is not taken lightly. I am sure that churches throughout our region will respond to this differently. In these unprecedented times, we should all be generous with one another. One factor that we have to consider is that City Reformed meets in an area of high population density and we have higher risks than churches in other parts of our region. In summary, it would have seemed really strange to do our grand reopening service this Sunday while everyone around us was being forced to shut down important parts of their lives.

⁵ Our decision to cap the attendance at 25 is a decision that applies to this Sunday. Again, all plans are week to week at this point. Because of the abrupt nature of this order and complications of our (already in process) venue change, we will not be requesting sign-ups for this week. People with a role in the service or who were already committed to a service role will attend with their families. This will largely fill up our allotted number. We’ll announce plans for future services later.

⁶ We support the use of masks because they have been shown to reduce the spread of infection. Lower spread means not only better public health but also results in a more open economy. Our [current policy](#) is fairly strict in that we mandate masks for all attendees. However, we do not require masks for those who use a microphone because it can disrupt the transmission and it diminishes the ability to communicate. Because communication is essential to the very nature of our worship service we make this exception and compensate by maintaining a greatly increased distance between people with a microphone and others in front of them.

This past week, Governor Wolf issued an [order mandating the use of masks](#) throughout the state in all public spaces. Under section 2 of the mask wearing order, there are multiple articles that specify the mask wearing criteria for various settings. Article B specifies that masks are required for everyone in any indoor location where members of the public are generally permitted. When City Reformed returns to an open service this may require further tightening to our current mask policy and may necessitate a face shield for those using a microphone. At this point, as our service remains closed and limited in size, we believe that our service is governed

I want to emphasize that all of our plans are provisional right now. With the shift to WT already happening, and with two days to plan when this order dropped on us, we are simply taking the next step forward.

Fortunately, we know that our overturned plans are still in God's hands. Neither mice nor men can predict or control their destinies. But our heavenly father is not surprised. He knows the end from the beginning and promises to shape us through difficulties as he brings us safely to his heavenly kingdom.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Matt".

Pastor Matt

by the guidelines found in Article E. This part of the order specifies that masks are necessary for those “engaged in work... in any room or enclosed area where other people except for members of the person’s own household or residence, are present *and unable to physically distance*.” This means that if we *are* able to physically distance and we are not interacting with members of the general public then masks are not mandated. We believe that our return to WT will further enhance our ability to keep a safe distance between any speaker and the others in attendance. For example, we expect that all speakers will be at least 30 feet from the nearest person this Sunday. All in attendance will wear a mask continuously with this noted exception.