

Friday, November 20, 2020

Dear City Reformed,

After a long break from writing COVID update letters, our current circumstances have pressed our church leadership to republish our COVID response plan and enact certain measures. In this letter, I will address three things: (1.) Evaluating our current circumstances, (2.) Explaining our refined COVID response plan, and (3.) Announcing the actions that we will take in response to that plan.

(1.) Evaluating Our Current Circumstances

Over the last few weeks, COVID cases have been on the rise in Allegheny County and throughout the nation. Current [PA rates of infection](#) are three times what they were during the worst moments of the summer and the spring. During the past week our County has continued to set single day records for new infections. While, hospitalizations and deaths lag several weeks behind new infections, [those numbers](#) are also on the rise.

It is extremely discouraging to head back into a period of high concern for the pandemic after all that we have been through. At the same time, it is important to recognize how much has changed since the beginning of the pandemic last spring. First of all, there are good reports about effective vaccines on the horizon. This will not be immediately available to the general public, but they will begin to provide a reduction of concern. Second, medical advice about reducing the transmission of the Coronavirus has become a lot more specific. While social distancing and hand-washing continue to be important steps to take, a much greater emphasis has been placed on reducing respiratory transmission through [mask wearing](#). Third, health officials are more focused on targeting the types of activities that appear to be most responsible for virus transmission. The recent [Allegheny County advisory announcement](#) is targeted at smaller social gatherings, rather than highly controlled public settings. County Executive [Rich Fitzgerald said](#), "The good news is we've really done a good job at work and at school," he said. "It's only after work and after school where we've really let our guard down." At this point, most public health officials are saying that they want to avoid a comprehensive lock-down like we experienced in the spring, but are instead trying to [promote mask wearing](#), social distancing, and hygiene.

For the City Reformed Community, the damages of the pandemic have struck home. Some of our members are frontline workers in the health care field and in essential jobs. This places them in positions of greater risk and vulnerability. At least six of our members have reported experiencing COVID-19 infections. In one case the struggle was particularly difficult. We have had two occasions in which an infected person attended church events, but contact tracing has not revealed any transmission of the disease at a church event. This encourages us to take our precautions seriously and remain vigilant. In addition, some of our members have lost family members and friends to the disease. Furthermore, we have all struggled with the less visible consequences of the pandemic. Anxiety, loneliness and depression have taken their toll. Our struggles with addiction become more acute. Difficult (and even good) relationships become more strained. While our members have been generally fortunate with their work arrangements, the economic impact of the pandemic restrictions are being felt across our region and in the midst of our congregation. In summary, this is a very difficult time and we have great need to support each other as we depend more deeply on our Heavenly Father. Our pre-scheduled call to fasting in prayer on Saturday November 20-Sunday November 21 is a well-timed occasion to seek God in the midst of this difficulty.

(2.) Explaining our Refined COVID Response Plan

City Reformed has spent the past eight months developing and updating our response plans to the COVID pandemic. As new medical information becomes available and as our public health officials provide new guidance, we continue

to adjust the plan. A summary of our response plan, entitled "[Safe and Sound](#)" can be found on the church website and will be distributed through all services. Here is the summary:

(A.) "Safe"

Before coming to a Church event, evaluate whether you or a member of your household is sick, whether you have engaged in risky travel or behavior, and whether you have been exposed to an infected person.

While at a Church event, continue the practice of comprehensive mask wearing, social distancing, and general hygiene.

After a Church event, notify us if you learn that you were infectious when attending a Church event. We will continue to track attendance at events so that we can trace concerning contacts and notify those in attendance.

(B.) "Sound"

While we respect the contributions of the scientific and healthcare communities, our ultimate hope lies in God. We will continue to urge our members to take the appropriate safety precautions listed above, but we will urge you to double down on your efforts to seek the Lord, and to encourage one another. Hebrews 10:19-25 sketches out the contours of a healthy Christian life. We are called to seek God, hold fast to our confession, and meet together for encouragement. When our meetings are in person, we need to give special care to take appropriate precautions. When our meetings are online, or on the phone, we need to commit energy to staying engaged and alert. None of these things are easy, but spiritual health is something that we need to fight for, now more than ever!

Morning Worship Service will continue to livestream, and admit a limited number of people who [pre-register](#). Please [sign up in advance](#). As the concerns of COVID-19 infection increase or decrease in our region, we will increase or reduce the numbers of people in attendance.

Evening Communion Service will continue to meet every other week. There is no need to pre-register, but we will encourage people to spread out among our services as possible. Attendees will check in when they arrive so that we have a record of who attends and can contact you in the event of an infection concern. As the concerns of COVID-19 infection increase or decrease in our region, we will alter the number of evening services. Because the service will remain short (25-30 mins), we can increase the number of services and decrease the total number of attendees at each.

Small Groups and Mentoring Relationships will continue to be a very important part of our corporate health. Many of our members are part of healthy and vibrant household groups, but some of our members are at risk for dangerous levels of isolation. Our small groups and mentoring relationships can take advantage of outdoor gatherings and the large indoor spaces at Greenfield Chapel as we comply with official health guidelines. Leaders will be informed as our gathering protocols need to change in the midst of the ongoing pandemic concerns.

(3.) Announcing Our Actions

On Wednesday, November 18, Allegheny County Health Officials announced [new guidelines](#) for social gatherings. This announcement was specifically labeled "advisory" and not an "order" though further orders could follow. We receive this as strongly worded guidance from the civic health officials. We also recognize the context of the direction is to *target* specific concerning areas that represent the highest risk for Coronavirus transmission. As noted in section one, the current surge in infections seem to be driven by smaller, informal gatherings and less by larger more controlled gatherings. Because the county advisory is subordinate to our state guidelines and those

guidelines exempt churches, and because the advisory specifically targets “smaller social gatherings”, and because the county executive framed this by commending controlled public gatherings, we do not believe that this directly limits our ability to gather as a church for public worship.

However, we recognize that this order comes from a context of grave concern about growth in infection rates in our county. This is occurring at a time when more people are spending time indoors and when the holiday season presents particular concerns for virus transmission. We believe that it is appropriate to recognize the gravity of our situation and enact parts of our COVID Response Plan (see “Safe and Sound” in section two.) We also urge our members to carefully evaluate their actions in their private lives and to seek to reduce the risk of infectious spread when possible.

We also recognize that our members have a variety of different risk levels and a variety of different home situations. The guiding principles are that we need to take health concerns seriously for our safety and for the safety of our neighbor. At the same time, we need to pursue healthy relational connections to stay mentally and spiritually healthy. Our in-person meetings will continue to offer opportunities for vital human connection, even as we continue to allow members to participate in their own household setting via online technology.

As a Church, we will take the following actions as we implement our plan:

- (1.) **We will reduce our Sunday Morning attendance by 50% for the immediate future.** We will remain at WT for the immediate future, but this will remain subject to decisions that WT makes about keeping their building open.
- (2.) **We will move our PM Service to the Greenfield building beginning Sunday November, 22.** There are several reasons that the Greenfield building (3929 Coleman St., 15207) is an attractive place for our evening service. While it has less seating than WT, it offers a lot of options for arranging the seating as we spread out into the fellowship area and even the mezzanine. Holding this service in our own space also offers us the flexibility to easily adjust the number of services when it seems necessary. Finally, exhaust fans in the attic can be used to significantly increase the airflow in the sanctuary.
- (3.) **We will add a third evening communion service, beginning Sunday, November 22.** The services will be moved to the **Greenfield building** and will be held at 4:00 pm, 5:00 pm and 6:00 pm. We encourage members to attend the service that aligns with the first letter of their last name as possible. (We recognize that members of household groups may have different names, and that some people have schedule constraints. This is not meant to be an absolute rule, but rather guidance to more evenly disperse our attendance.)
 - a. 4:00 pm – last names A-F
 - b. 5:00 pm – last names G-O
 - c. 6:00 pm – last names P-Z
- (4.) **We will encourage our small groups to observe the guidelines for their meetings.**

The Letter to the Hebrews is written to people who “have need of endurance” (Heb 10:36). That certainly seems to apply to our situation. Fortunately, God has pledged to care for us in the midst of our difficulties. We are not alone, but are in the care of our Heavenly Father.

In Christ,



Pastor Matt