

Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church Guiding Principles During the Coronavirus Pandemic

"I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!"

(Psalm 27: 13-14)

We yearn to return to church gathering together. While essential in-person activity and work has continued around us, and more is being opened up, we naturally think about when the time will become right to "re-open church."

In consideration of return, Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church (PHPC) will be taking our cues from the virus, health science, and our particular context and calling. We continue to learn more from public health scientists about transmission, protection, and safe gathering practices as to when they will become possible again. This much, however, is already clear: the possibility of safely gathering again, for intergenerational communities like ours, will emerge slowly, and return to gathering will be necessarily cautious and gradual in phases.

This policy lays out what we know, what we reasonably expect, and how we will be guided in decision-making about return to in-person activity at PHPC.

General Guidelines About Gatherings and Return to Our Building and Customs:

1. As Christians, with God we prioritize the health and wellness of all God's people, sharing Jesus' special concern for those who are most vulnerable and marginalized.

2. As Christians we share a particular calling, and as a proud intergenerational and inclusive church, we are a particular kind of community organization that must be "necessarily cautious." We are not a business or a restaurant or a public school. PHPC is a PC(USA) congregation, an inclusive community that seeks to "connect faith with everyday life." And as an intergenerational community, we have a particular call to give special attention in our decision making to the needs of those especially susceptible to coronavirus. This includes seniors, people with compromised immune systems, and those with respiratory and cardiac conditions. If gathering in person puts people at serious risk, we must refrain from so doing.

3. The work of the church continues, and even continues to grow, as we wait to return. Thankfully, by the work of the Spirit, we do not forego our mission during this time of change. As the apostle Peter reminds us, "Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). The church is not the building, or in-person gatherings; it is the people of God loving in the way of Jesus. During the suspension of gathering, we have discovered new ways to fulfill our mission that are transforming our church for the better and will be here to stay.

4. Until there is minimal community spread, a coronavirus cure or vaccination, gatherings of the whole congregation together as we are accustomed are uncertain. Other hopeful developments like anti-viral medication, should they be realized, could also serve to mitigate the risks associated with gathering.

5. Therefore, our gathering in person will remain suspended, and the building and office will remain closed for non-essential use, through July 31, 2020. This action and timeline are consistent with the guidance and model of the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta.

a. Current guidance, including the CDC's, suggests that gathering in person can be considered, with strict safe practices, when community spread becomes minimal. When that becomes reliably measurable and demonstrable, the Session will consider a necessarily cautious and phased-in approach to gathering again.

b. The PHPC Pandemic Task Force on behalf of the Session will monitor and evaluate public health developments. Updates will be communicated to the congregation as needed.

c. This regrettably means canceling summer trips and gatherings like Vacation Bible School. All summer trips have been canceled by our mission partners and Montreat Conference Center.

i. As summer trips are so vitally important to our youth program, virtual experiences will be offered for our youth to learn and grow together.

ii. As our mission trip experiences are vital to our outreach ministry and to our mission partners, we will seek alternative ways to support the work of our partners.

iii. Vacation Bible School will instead be offered in an online format July 6-10, 2020.

d. We will continue to be a growing and loving church in the ways we have available for now. Sunday worship, church school, youth group, small groups, and committees will continue to meet online.

e. Church pastors and staff will continue to work remotely.

6. There is likely a time upcoming between now and a return to large public gathering where a safe and stepwise approach, beginning with sanitary and safely distant small groups, can enable us to begin some gathering together.

a. After at least several consecutive weeks of improving public health conditions, and upon authorization of the Session, PHPC can consider small in-person gatherings that will require careful observance of social distancing recommendations, including strict sanitation and prevention measures.

i. A gradual approach toward gathering can be considered for church building partners, provided they agree to and strictly adhere to all safe conditions of use.

ii. Provided safe standards can be met in so doing, regular office functions could begin to resume, with staff and visitors maintaining social distancing and strict sanitation and prevention measures. The World Health Organization has published guidelines for [“Getting Your Workplace Ready for COVID-19”](#) that are specific and useful.

iii. In consideration of any such returns to gathering, as health science continues to develop, we will rely on the latest guidance, including the CDC’s, for setting safe parameters.

b. A thoughtful and useful step-wise, phased-in approach to [“Returning to Church”](#) has been outlined by the Wisconsin Council of Churches, which identifies and describes three phases, each triggered by a significant measurable and demonstrable improvement in public health and community spread.

i. PHASE ONE: worship, church school, and small groups continue online, life ritual gatherings like weddings and funerals kept to 10 or fewer, office and building uses can be reconsidered with strict sanitation and protection measures in place, high risk individuals continue to shelter in place.

ii. PHASE TWO: worship online continues with consideration for worship in small groups, mix of online and in person small group offerings with strict sanitation and protection measures in place, life ritual gatherings like weddings and funerals kept to 50 or fewer, church office and building use can resume if kept small and safe, high risk individuals continue to shelter in place.

iii. PHASE THREE: worship gathering can be considered with safe practices and also made available online, church school and small groups can consider gathering safely again, church office and building use can consider expanding safely, safe pastoral care visits can resume, meetings can be considered safely.

The Executive Presbyter of the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta has stated per recommendations including the CDC’s, “No matter what happens in the business sector and community-at-large, it is imperative for congregations and houses of worship to continue to refrain from large gatherings until a congregation can find a way to do so in a way that keeps people safe and can keep up the proper health standards in the midst of the COVID-19. This means that churches cannot rush to go back to church business as usual.”

As advised by our health, community, and denominational authorities, we expect a very slow and gradual return toward something that will not resemble church business exactly as we have known it. But this time is far more than waiting. It is active fulfillment of our mission in different ways, and it is

preparing us for the next good things God will do with us. As we long for and consider a return to our building and customs, we will be who we have always been in the name of Christ: deliberate, guided by principle, vigilant about wellness, prioritizing of the vulnerable, and praying and working for the recovery of the community and world.

Supporting Resources:

["Returning to Church," Wisconsin Council of Churches.](#)

[COVID-19: Executive Presbyter Letter in Response to Reopening Georgia](#)

[COVID-19: Reopening to Reimagining Task Force Letter, Presbytery of Greater Atlanta](#)

[CDC Guidance for Community and Faith-Based Organizations to Plan, Prepare, and Respond](#)

[World Health Organization: Getting your workplace ready for COVID-19](#)

Additional Scriptural Reflections:

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you." (John 15:12-14)

"Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." (Joshua 1:9)

"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." (Isaiah 43:18-19)

"Though the fig tree does not blossom and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exalt in the God of my salvation." (Habakkuk 3:17-18)

"Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy." (Proverbs 31:8-9)

"All things are lawful', but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful', but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of others." (1 Corinthians 10: 23-24)

Additional Reflections from our Book of Order:

"As the Church seeks reform and fresh direction, it looks to Jesus Christ who goes ahead of us and calls us to follow him. United with Christ in the power of the Spirit, the Church seeks "not [to] be conformed to this world, but [to] be transformed by the renewing of [our] minds, so that [we] may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2)." (F-1.0401)

"The unity of believers in Christ is reflected in the rich diversity of the Church's membership. ...The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall guarantee full participation and representation in its worship, governance, and emerging life to all persons or groups within its membership." (F-1.0403)

"As it participates in God's mission, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) seeks:

- *a new openness to the sovereign activity of God in the Church and in the world, to a more radical obedience to Christ, and to a more joyous celebration in worship and work;*
- *a new openness in its own membership, becoming in fact as well as in faith a community of women and men of all ages, races, ethnicities, and worldly conditions, made one in Christ by the power of the Spirit, as a visible sign of the new humanity;*
- *a new openness to see both the possibilities and perils of its institutional forms in order to ensure the faithfulness and usefulness of these forms to God's activity in the world;*
- *and a new openness to God's continuing reformation of the Church ecumenical, that it might be more effective in its mission." (F-1.0404)*

Additional Background:

The Coronavirus pandemic has caused everyone on earth to sacrifice customs and comforts for the sake of public health, particularly for those most vulnerable to the virus. Making change and sacrifice for the sake of wellness, with particular attention to those most marginalized and vulnerable, was core to the ministry of Jesus himself. While the change and sacrifice asked of us during these uncertain times is significant, this is what we Christians do. We love one another as a reflection of the generous and sacrificial love given to us in Christ.

During this time of great concern, due to the global pandemic, as it has done during previous epidemics, PHPC has adapted our programming to include safe social-distance practices that emphasize relationship and compassion. Responding to God's grace, we have been moved to *love God, love each other, and love our neighbors near and far* by sheltering in place and doing no harm with our activities. PHPC has suspended all activities of in-person gathering, and closed the building and church office, with all staff working remotely.

More specifically, we quickly aligned with the swift move toward a public consensus to shelter in place, while maintaining our sense of community, by moving our gatherings online, including public worship, church school classes, small groups, youth group, staff and committee meetings, and fellowship events. We have also developed meaningful new practices like weekly check-ins, a calling ministry, weekly online fellowship and prayer, and safe pastoral care to expand and fulfill our mission during the pandemic. As a function of these efforts and the times, it seems we are reaching more people more regularly with support, good news, and hope. With the challenges of the times have come great opportunities to expand our reach and share love in important and relevant ways.

We are grateful for the blessings of online gathering and in them have discovered new and lasting opportunities for connecting and growing. That said, as Christians, we continue to believe that we are an organic body together and we function best when we are present with one another, and we yearn to return to the place and the people in whom we have found sanctuary and our better selves. At the same time, we see these same competing needs, feelings, and opinions playing out in the secular world where there is less public consensus about return to in-person activity. While we at PHPC certainly care deeply

about societal recovery, as the present recession adversely affects so many people, especially the poor and marginalized, we also consider it part of our spiritual responsibility to keep one another and the community as safe as possible. And so, while we are directed by the same forces that prevail on civic leaders, business owners, and individual workers, we are also guided by a different set of principles that create even greater complexities as we endeavor to make the best decisions we can for our church family. It is important, therefore, to clarify, drawing on the perspectives of our faith, our mission, and health science, our position on gatherings and when we will return to our building and customs.

With thanks to the Session of Saint Luke's Presbyterian Church in Dunwoody for sharing the framework of this document for our adaption.