



May 28, 2020

Greetings, Lettered Streets Covenant Church!

This past week president Trump said that he would support the re-opening of houses of worship even against the orders of local and state officials. I have had numerous inquiries both from inside and outside of our congregation with regard to my stance on the president's statement.

Part of what makes us a healthy church is that I do not operate in a vacuum. I work within a Leadership Team who seeks input from prayerful reflection on the scriptures, our staff, our denominational leaders, and local and state governing bodies. Ultimately, no matter what input and advice I receive, I am accountable to Jesus and so is our Leadership Team.

We hold this task with utmost reverence and humility. None of us has ever led through a crisis such as this, because no one has. What we know is that people are hurting. People we love are lonely and feeling isolated. People we have vowed to serve are suffering the loss of loved ones and unable to grieve with the gathered church community. As your pastor, I hear you! I hear the desire to get together again to exercise our right to worship, pray, and fellowship in person. I long for the day when we can safely gather, but that day has not arrived.

Because our Leadership Team and I hold our task with such reverence we must also take other factors into consideration. After all, just because something is permitted, does not make it good, moral, or Christlike. After discussing things with the Leadership Team, there are many reasons why we do not believe opening the church building for worship gatherings is a wise choice but I will simply list four, here.

First, it is a mark of Christlikeness to consider the most vulnerable among us. Many of our congregants are either immunocompromised or living with people who are. Additionally, we have a relatively high percentage of frontline workers who are not only exposed to Covid-19 on a regular basis, but

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risk exposing family members, any of which could be a carrier at a public gathering. We are called to submit our freedom for the sake of others.

Second, we should honor the sacrifices being made by those in our congregation who are making huge sacrifices to help maintain essential services while working to flatten the curve of infection rates. What does it say to our medics, medical personnel, store clerks and operators, transit workers, and trades people who are taking extra precautions at great risk to themselves, if we simply start gathering in opposition to the scientific data that suggests it is too soon? What does it say to our teachers and workers who are removed from their ideal setting (or removed from work altogether) if we don't stand with them in solidarity?

Third, what is our relationship as the church to the state and local authorities? They are not asking us to bow down to Baal, they are asking us to be a part of the community effort to flatten the curve. Right or wrong in all the ways they are doing it, I do not envy the task of leading a state or city through a pandemic. Let's pray for them now! We are to respect the governing authorities and pray for them up until the time when they are calling us to live contrary to the life of following Jesus. We may not be able to gather for health and safety reasons, but we *are* the church and that has never been called into question.

Finally, we should consider our witness to the wider world. Even if we were to rush back together and nothing happens what would have been lost by waiting another month or so when we get the green light from the scientific community and local leaders? Alternatively, what would it say to the world if we rushed things and then fostered a second wave or even a localized outbreak? Consider how you feel whenever you read about yet another church who defied the data and were the cause of spreading the curse of Coronavirus rather than helping bring blessing to the world

At this point the Leadership Team and I deem it unwise to attempt opening the doors for worship gatherings. However, I leave you with two positives to consider.

First, the Leadership Team and staff are diligently making preparations for the time when we can start gathering, even in a limited capacity. Governor Inslee just laid out some new and encouraging news about limited gatherings in Phase Two. We are ordering supplies, preparing protocols, and strategizing how to safely and effectively phase in a return to worship gatherings. It is hard work and we are juggling many variables while seeking guidance from trusted sources. Please pray for us and for the days when we can gather once again!

Second, the church has never been closed. Before the stay at home order, that kind of statement was usually seen as pastor-speak akin to my pet peeve of calling the building a church rather than the people. But this new reality has turned an ecclesiological concept into a functional reality. WE are the church whether or not we gather together on Sundays in a church building or in homes. Yes, ideally we would gather for worship. And yes, over the long run we were made to make disciples in community not over computers and conversations from across the street. The time will come when we will be back together to heal and grow together. But in the words in the story of Esther, who is to say that we were not called to be the church scattered for such a time as this?

Jesus knew it would be you and I who make up Lettered Streets Covenant Church in this moment. Jesus knew we would be facing this pandemic together. Jesus knew there would be suffering and inconvenience and even loss of life. And I believe Jesus is leading us to lessons, conversations, and points of growth that we may not have otherwise experienced.

Take heart! We are the church—the body of Jesus! No building, no government, no virus, nothing can change that reality.

May the peace of Christ be with you,

Chris