

September 15, 2020

First Lutheran Family –

We had all hoped and prayed that by this time we would be worshiping in the sanctuary again. Unfortunately, given the reality around us, and our commitment to the safety of each and every member of our community, we will continue to worship together digitally for the time being.

The Reopening Task Force met on September 12th to evaluate and review where we stand in preparation for a possible return to the sanctuary. However, since our last letter, the Brookings community has moved into the substantial spread category, and we have 10 times the number of active cases as we did just a month ago.

In the conversation, it became clear there were great concerns. We were concerned about the potential of enforcing a mask policy when many people are opposed to wearing them; about the possibility that even one person might carry life-long repercussions because we worried about what other people are thinking; about the medical community's great concern for increased transmission going forward into the fall and winter seasons; and about the reality that South Dakota is in the top two for virus infections, making us aware that our previously safe perspectives are being challenged.

As we discussed how we should move forward, and if we should open, I felt a sense of anxiety and fear. Almost every knowledgeable person I hear speak about this shares their concern and their frustration at the perception that this is just passing, or it isn't that big of a deal, or it doesn't do that much damage. The fear and anxiety I felt was over the concern that even one member of the congregation would be harmed by a decision that wasn't made using the criteria we shared with the congregation back in June. So, we made the difficult, but correct, decision to keep worshiping digitally until we believe it's safe.

This means there will be challenges and changes as we move forward. The first major change you'll encounter will be the Annual Meeting – we'll still hold it this coming Sunday at 10:30, but it'll be outside in the parking lot and available by Zoom at <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89723487423>. We will keep it as tight and simple as possible, while still attending to the important work of passing a budget and voting on a property use resolution to allow the food bank to build a facility on First Lutheran Church property. All legal voting members attending by Zoom or in person will be welcome to vote (we'll be recording names for voting records).

The next changes involve our education ministries. Journey to Discipleship will continue with a hybrid model of live video, recorded sections, and home instruction; Confirmation will continue with a focus on small group opportunities and conversation/instruction on the book, "Free to Be"; Youth Ministry at both the Middle and High School levels will be a work in progress as we welcome on board our new Director of Youth Ministry, Madison McCabe. Adult Ed and faith growth will continue to use digital platforms, seeking out opportunities for Bible study and cultural conversation.

On September 27th, weather permitting, we will hold our Confirmation service outside the Mission Coffeehouse. The service will be at 2:00pm, and we will bless our confirmands with distancing protocols in place. The congregation is invited and encouraged to join us.

The worship schedule will be adapted in anticipation for when it is safe to gather in person in the sanctuary. The contemporary service will be moved from Sunday at 10:30am to Saturday evening at 7:00pm, found on the church's Facebook page live-stream. The traditional service will remain on Sunday morning at 8:30am, available by both radio (1430AM) or Facebook live-stream. The Saturday evening service outdoor communion service will be discontinued due to shortened days and weather challenges.

The First Lutheran Preschool is open and operating, but doing so with strict protocols and intentional care to limit any potential exposure.

The Mission Coffeehouse will remain closed. We recognize the value of this ministry of the church, and we look forward to having this space open again. However, the primary mission of the coffeehouse is to be a safe, welcoming environment for people to encounter the church and its mission – at the current time, we do not believe we can offer this. Further, there are small business coffeeshops in the community that need your business. We will be here when this is over, and we want them to be as well.

I recognize that this is not ideal, nor is it all that enjoyable. While some have found comfort in their home worship experience, others feel separated and disconnected. If there is something you believe would enhance the digital experience in the short-term, please contact the church to let us know. We want to provide the best possible experience, all while holding responsibility for the safety of our community as a primary concern.

When it comes down to it, the decision we make is based on our belief that we are doing the right thing. Sometimes to walk the path of faith you don't take the easy, or the well-travelled path. You need to stand on the convictions of why and how you make decisions, trusting God to bless the path you walk.

We eagerly await the time when we will gather the community of faith in comfort and safety, for worship and praise.

May God bless you with health, grace, and care for others.

Pastor Dave