

Plan for Return to In-Person Worship
St. John's Lutheran Church
Bellevue, Ohio
May 26, 2020

"For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Galatians 5:13-14).

In his Letter to the Galatians, St. Paul reminds his readers that **love is at the heart of God's commandments. Love for our God, but also love for our neighbors.** We are called by Jesus and led by the Holy Spirit to ground ourselves in God's love and allow love of neighbor to guide our practices.

In the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, many of us had great expectations that our congregation would return to in-person worship after a short hiatus. We are beginning to understand that **out of concern for ourselves, and the safety of our neighbors, our return to parish life will take place in incremental and extended phases.** There will not be a straight march back to normalcy, but a series of fits and starts. We may experience two steps forward followed by one step back, so we should be ready to adjust and adapt quickly and safely.

While Governor DeWine never told communities of faith that they could not continue meeting, the vast majority of those communities chose to suspend in-person worship. Like so many other faith communities, we at St. John's suspended in-person worship and began offering online worship services on YouTube on March 22. **These online services will continue to be offered indefinitely.**

That leaves open the question of when we should return to in-person worship services. Our bishop, Rev. Daniel Beaudoin, asked that all congregations of the Northwestern Ohio Synod refrain from holding in-person worship through May 31, and that we use the month of May to develop a plan to safely return to in-person worship in our church buildings.

The St. John's Executive Team, including Mike Berger, Marc Lovins, Pat Olsen, Shaun Smith, and I began meeting weekly on May 3 to develop such a plan. After much discussion of relevant issues and questions, review of guidelines and considerations of the CDC, the Ohio Health Department, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, our insurance company, our own synod bishop Daniel and our synod Parish Plan of Return Task Force, and, after prayerful consideration, we have decided to **restart in-person worship in the St. John's worship center on Sunday, June 7, at the regular worship time of 10:00 am.**

To that end, we have developed **the following Plan of Return:**

Decision to hold worship and number of worshipers to allow

At least a week prior to the next scheduled in-person worship service, the Executive Team will, based on the current conditions regarding the spread of coronavirus, including any significant changes in infection and hospitalization and death rates, determine whether or not to offer in-person worship on the next Sunday, and how many worshipers will be allowed to attend. The Executive Team reserves the right to cancel an in-person worship service at any time.

Responsibilities of Members (prior to decision to attend)

If any of the following apply to you, please consider **not** coming to in-person worship and use the online worship option. Please keep yourself and your neighbors safe:

- You are not feeling well or have a temperature, or otherwise are experiencing symptoms of Covid-19 or any other illness. For a complete list of Covid-19 symptoms, go [here](#).
- You have been recently exposed to someone who you know who may have symptoms of Covid-19.
- You are within 14 days of returning from another part of the state or country
- You are over 60 years of age, or have health issues that would put you at additional risk were you to become infected with coronavirus.

Responsibilities of Members (after decision to attend)

- Everyone planning to attend in-person worship must register their intention to do so by noon on the Saturday before the scheduled Sunday service.
 - For those with email and internet, this will be done with a link to an online registration form.
 - For those without the internet, you will register by calling the church office at 419-483-5442. If no one is available to receive your call, leaving a message with your name and phone number will register your plan to attend
 - If the maximum number of worshippers has been reached, make plans to attend the next scheduled service.
- Bring personal hand sanitizer with you.
- Bring your own face mask, and wear it from the time you enter the building until you leave the building. You will remove your mask to receive the elements of Holy Communion. A mask will be provided for you if you don't have one.
- Families with children are welcome to attend, with the following guidelines
 - Families will sit together for the entirety of the service. There will be no movement to Youth Gospel or forward for a Children's Message. Pastor Mark will deliver a Children's Message to kids where they are at in the pew
 - Parents will make the decision on whether or not their children will wear a mask while inside the church building.
 - Children's "one-time-use" activity bags will be prepared and ready to pick up in the narthex prior to worship.

Preparation of Building and Worship Areas

- All areas that will be used by worshipers will be cleaned and sanitized, before and after worship.
- Women will use the restroom by the elevator.
- Men will use the boys bathroom in the Educational Wing (this will change once Preschool is back in session). Men's room door will be propped open. Signage will indicate one person in the men's room at a time.
- All hymnals and other items will be removed from the pews.
- Every other pew will be closed, and social distancing in each pew will be clearly marked.
- Social distancing markers will be placed on the floor of the lobby and narthex.
- An offering plate will be placed on a small table in the narthex to receive offerings.
- Bulletins will have the entire service printed, and will be picked up by worshipers in the narthex.
- Prepackaged elements of Holy Communion will be available to be picked up by worshipers in the narthex.

Entering the church building and worship area

- Worshipers are asked to affix their mask before exiting their vehicle. Worshipers without a mask will receive one upon entering the building
- Maintain a minimum of six-foot distance from other worshipers.
- Once inside the building, worshipers are asked to keep speaking to a minimum. You will be "checked in" as having attended worship on that day.
- Worshipers will pick up two items in the narthex - a worship bulletin and a small ziploc bag containing prepackaged elements for Holy Communion - a small wafer, and a small portion of grape juice.
- Ushers will direct worshipers to pews at the discretion of the usher, who will distribute those attending to effect necessary social distancing. Worshipers will not be allowed to "sit where they want," or "sit where they always sit."

During the worship service

- The service will include an opening and closing hymn, and some congregational responses, but we are requesting that worshipers not speak or sing. We will have a "designated speaker/singer" who will speak or sing into a microphone in a corner of the balcony.
- Generally, the service will be abbreviated and there will be no liturgical music played.
- We will not pass the peace.
- Holy Communion will be received in the pews, using the pre-packaged elements picked up earlier.

After the worship service

- At the end of the service, worshipers will be dismissed by the ushers, starting from the back, to maintain social distancing.
- Worshipers are asked to maintain social distancing as they exit and in the parking lot.

In the event of a member/guest testing positive for Covid-19 we will

- Notify the Huron County Health Department
- Notify those who attended in person worship the previous two Sundays
- Temporarily suspend in-person worship
- Complete a professional cleaning and disinfecting
- Determine when to resume in-person worship

The St. John's Executive Team will, on a regular basis, evaluate these procedures, and revise as necessary for safety and efficiency.