

Hi Friends,

I had written something earlier to send out in our Friday email, but decided that I needed to address something while it was still happening. As I write this, President Trump has just made an announcement that the Center for Disease Control will classify houses of worship as “essential” and is ordering Governors to allow them to open “right now”.

I want to make sure that all members and friends of Kennewick First know where I am as the pastor of our congregation. First I admit that when we first got word that we were going to close our buildings and cease in-person worship services, I was disappointed that places of worship were not considered essential, yet some states classified gun stores and pot shops as essential. As I heard from friends in the medical field who related horrible stories of the painful deaths they witnessed patients suffer at the hands of this virus and as I got limited information from a couple friends who live in China about how the virus was affecting the communities in which they live, I was happy to comply with the shut-down order. I am not an expert on pandemics or contagious diseases, so I choose to rely on the information that is overwhelmingly agreed upon, but those who are. And seek the council of people who are qualified to give it.

Having said that there has been a rush to reopen churches and resume in person worship gatherings. I get it! My heart yearns for the time when we can gather together, sing songs, be inspired by the hearing of God’s word, and be together with friends, but until we have procedures in place and we have the go ahead from our Bishop’s office we will not be rushing the process to return to in-person worship services. There are two main reasons why:

- 1) As disciples of Jesus Christ and specifically as United Methodists, part of our fundamental understanding of life together is that we “do no harm”. From the earliest days of the Wesleyan movement this was part of our core.
- 2) I believe that the church is the foundation of the Kingdom of God. Jesus tells us that the “Kingdom of God” is the result of a society that tangibly and realistically follows the commands to “Love God ... and Love your neighbor” (Matthew 22).

I cannot in good conscience rush to re-open our building and have in-person worship gatherings when the likelihood of doing harm is so great. KFUMC has many people who fall into the most vulnerable and “at risk” categories for complications and possible death from Covid-19. It is contrary to what I believe as a Christian, as a disciple and as your Pastor to knowingly reopen our doors for worship gatherings, while the level of infections is still growing in our community and we cannot offer our friends and members a reasonable level of safety from infection and spreading the virus. As a church, we are called to love God and love our neighbor, and I do not believe that we can honestly follow that calling and simultaneously put people at risk.

This week we have received guidelines from our Conference and a 4-phase strategy that moves us incrementally back to reopening our doors and gathering together. Our Emergency Planning Group has been meeting nearly every week since the shut-down, to address health, safety and “Mission Critical” (to use crisis management language) issues within the congregation. We have begun the process of looking over the plan given to us by the Pacific Northwest Conference and will be systematically and strategically forming our plan to address the safety, logistics and capabilities of our congregation. We will move through the phases at the pace that is right for us, and at a rate that incorporates best practices and limits risk to the very best of our abilities. With that being said, we will not be reopening our doors to gatherings for several weeks. I know it is disappointing, but I believe along with our Bishop, that reopening too soon is inconsistent with loving our neighbors and doing no harm.

Finally, I want to stress that WE ARE THE CHURCH. The church is not a worship gathering. It is the people that are bound together by faith in the God of justice, grace and love! Worship is just one part of who we are and what we do. We worship together... yes, but we serve those in need because Jesus calls us to. We grow in our faith and understanding of God, because God loves us and wants us to be in relationship with Him. We build meaningful and lasting friendships because the same love that God shows to us, we show to those in this community. I would be a poor leader, and even worse steward of this sacred position, if I put ¾ of our calling in jeopardy for the sake of rushing to reopen our doors to worship gatherings.

I appreciate the support you have shown me as your pastor and the other members of our staff. I am eternally grateful for it. And as always... I am in this journey with you to live as a disciple of Jesus, and work for a world transformed by God’s grace and love because we are all God’s beloved children. My commitment to you is to keep you informed as best I can as to the work and progress, we are making towards that wonderful time that we can gather together in worship again!

With all my prayers and heart for this community I love!

Pastor Mark McMurray