

Friday, June 18, 2020

Dear Westwood family,

We love our church community and we long to be together! Especially with both the pandemic and the recent events in our city, triggering both incredibly difficult days as well as some signs of hopeful change, it is hard to not share in conversation, song and prayer in-person.

Below are some decisions that the Council and Staff have made this past week, as we've struggled with the most faithful and responsible way forward when it comes to returning to worship and other gatherings that we all miss. These decisions will be constantly monitored, and we will continue to communicate with you weekly. We have considered and will continue to make our decisions based upon:

- What Christian love looks like for all people, especially our elders and those most vulnerable
- What the best medical advice is at this time from our MN Dept. of Health
- What other large ELCA congregations in the western suburbs are doing and the recommendation of our local bishop

It is disappointing to say the least, but for the reasons above we have chosen to not begin in-person worship this summer, the same decision as all the other large ELCA congregations we've been in touch with. We are waiting to hear from the St. Louis Park Outdoor Recreation Center (a large covered space near Byerlys/Target) to gather on a Sunday in July and August, so watch for those dates...but please read through how we will be proceeding.

In addition to health and safety, it is worth noting how different our in-person worship would be if we returned soon, and will likely still be this fall: face-masks for all, physical distancing, limited numbers (meaning sign-up sheets or turning people away) and an inability to sit down and share coffee and conversation together before or after the service. There is universal consensus that "one of the most dangerous things we can do right now is get together in groups and sing", so although the piano and organ can be played, worship will not feel or sound "normal". We WILL get there, but it could be a while.

Meanwhile, it delights me to hear of the Circles and Bible Studies that continue to meet online...of the homebound who tell me that "someone from church called me!"...of the people we are reaching online in ways we had not previously...and of you who are keeping up with our ongoing, vibrant and critical mission and vision through our online worship/sermons.

God is creating opportunities for us both during and coming out of these difficult months. The Council and Staff are discussing ways to reallocate resources and time as we figure out both the near and the new future. We are hopeful and confident that, as always, Westwood has the good courage to rise to this moment and come out even stronger than before.

We pray for you and love you, dear church family. And we thank you for the prayers you offer for our beloved community and for this world we serve.

+Pastors Tania, Jason and Miriam

NOW THROUGH AUGUST: What's Happening & What's Not

- No in-person worship in the sanctuary
- A worship opportunity one Sunday in July and one in August at the St. Louis Park Outdoor Recreation Center; details and dates forthcoming
- Online worship and online family activities available, as well as some online meetings and education sessions
- All indoor on-site meetings, groups, classes suspended
- Weddings, funerals moving up to 50 people max at the end of June with all recommended precautions taken (masks, distancing, no social time) and they will be live-streamed, available on our website; small baptismal services being recorded, and added to online worship
- WECC is open at about half capacity, serving as many families as possible with at least part-time care; Room 25 now a classroom again as more space needed to accommodate smaller class sizes
- Office staff working onsite limited hours; program staff working remotely
- Small group backyard or online Zoom conversations around Prayer of Good Courage project and general financial update start mid-July and

go through August. Sign-up on Westwood Connect for one gathering; 20 options. Info also in Enews or call church office.

NEXT PHASE (may begin September 1)

(We will re-evaluate this in early August, at which point we'll know what schools are doing and where health data is at.)

- In-person worship options with 150 people in Sanctuary
- Online worship continues, along with online meetings and education sessions
- Meetings/groups may begin when worship also begins; limited times, limited rooms, limited numbers based on rooms, Tuesday & Thursday evenings only due to custodial staff time; not adding more/new groups or events through 2020
- Children, Youth & Family programming for fall will be determined in August, as public school decisions may affect some of this, but likely that most things will need to continue online for a while.
- Weddings, funerals with up to 150 people with same precautions as worship
- Baptisms would be held in worship when worship begins, or can be filmed at another time and included in online worship
- Sept. 13, Rally Sunday, kicks off our fall theme, "Courageous Imaginations", with weekly WestwoodU classes online (even if smaller worship is happening at that time)
- WECC will step up numbers, as planned and as ratios allow; half of Good Shepherd used for classrooms thru 2020
- Community Meal cancelled thru end of 2020; large group events like Holiday Fair cancelled for 2020

By mid-October we will determine details and dates for the next phase.

May God's hand continue to lead us and God's love continue to support us, as we confidently continue to live out the mission God has given us.