



Friday, March 19, 2021

RE: ReOpening the Church for ministry

Dear church family-

It seems that good news about the pandemic is finally beginning to lift restrictions across the world, and just in time for the Good News about Jesus to be shared during this Resurrection season. Covid-19 cases are down, restrictions are beginning to lift and the vaccine is rolling out across the world at a faster than anticipated rate.

Because of these good reports, our Leadership Council has been working on a plan for reopening the church and I would like to detail for you the contributing factors to that discussion as well as details about the plan as it is for now. The following are some of my thoughts and insights that I shared with the council for consideration.

By now, you are just as aware as I am about the roll out of the vaccines across the country. Real world data is pouring in and showing that these “vaccines are effective at preventing COVID-19 disease, especially severe illness and death.” Additionally, we also know that the vaccines prevent transmission of the disease as well. In short, the vaccines are working as we have prayed for, so much so that the CDC is beginning to lift policy recommendations about mask wearing and social distancing. They now report that vaccinated people do not need to wear a mask around other vaccinated persons nor is quarantine necessary even if exposed to someone with Covid. (<https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2021/p0308-vaccinated-guidelines.html>) At this point, vaccines are rolling out faster than expected, which of course is Great News. The original plan of reaching 1B Tier 2 by mid-April has now been moved up to March 22. This is the last of the “High-risk Critical” categories. This thing is clearly almost over.

However, we still have to deal with policies, political interference, and public phobias about how and when to move forward as we attempt to regain some normalcy in life. As a Council, we need to think about an approach that is (as I have tried to say from the beginning) reasonable and responsible. We will need to discuss our comfort level in reopening and how we execute and communicate our plan to our church family.

To that end – I would like to share with you my thoughts on the matter.

First, I think that we as a church should support that everyone be vaccinated provided you don't have some other underlying health concern. The vaccine is proving to be both extraordinarily

effect as well as reasonably safe. It is also the quickest way for us to reach herd immunity and save lives in the process. Lastly, this also helps us to re-open our community to safely go back to work, enjoy social gatherings and re-open church. There is a lot of polarizing information out about the opinions surrounding the vaccine. The council would like to encourage everyone to look at this issue objectively and do your best to remove any partisan thinking from your personal decision.

Second, I believe that it is time to reopen the church as fully as possible and as soon as possible. It is important to admit that we are not able to prolong the shut-downs forever. We have struggled along for a full year and the extra-covid impact is just as real as it mounts against us. On a practical level, just as we are seeing the tremendous financial impact in people's lives, we are beginning to see a downward trend in our finances here at Fellowship. Additionally, we are seeing that same attrition in attendance at both in-person and online church. There is also deep spiritual impact as well. We have clearly lost connections with congregants who will not return to church and the spiritual/emotional weight of this year is heavy upon everyone.

We know that God is our strength and our refuge in these troubled times but without the collective family of God for growth and support we are doomed. Whereas, personal disciplines are vital for spiritual growth, there is no such things as a Christian sustaining a vibrant relationship with Jesus apart from some kind of worshipping community. Instead, our enemy loves to separate us from the pack, isolated and alone, so that he can devour our faith and love for God. Collective connection to the Body of Christ is vital to our understanding of what it even means to be a Christian.

Third, reopening the church is vital to continuing and expanding our mission of bringing the light and life of Jesus into the world. We have done our best to feed children at Whitman, support the orphanage work in Kenya and even develop an online presence that reach people in new ways. But our work in mission has been clearly hindered. Like Paul, when I think of the problems from this last year, I say that "Satan hindered us." (1 Thessalonians 2:18) I think it is time to face our enemy. If you haven't noticed our world is growing darker and more chaotic hour by hour. It is utter insanity to think of the shifts in the culture that we are seeing. Honestly, in my spirit I want to continue to hide safely in my basement from all the ills around us. But we are compelled by the Spirit of God to speak truth and do good works. We must remerge with the mandates from our God to fight to help bring His Kingdom into the world.

Blessings and be safe out there.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rev Cary Peden". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Rev. Cary Peden
Fellowship Church / Pastor