

Bethlehem, Middletown and St. Peter, Trenton Worship Plan as of 5.18.20

“And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’” – Matthew 25:40 (NRSV)

It has been a long couple of months. I continue to be inspired by the ways you all have encouraged, inspired, comforted and cared for each other – and me! –during this pandemic. Thank you.

While the pandemic isn't over yet, we may have the opportunity to worship in the same space again in the not-too-distant future. We do not have a date set for this, as Governor DeWine may well extend the stay-at-home orders past the end of May.

But if instead it is deemed safe to lift those orders, Council will then meet again to decide what date this plan will take effect. We will communicate that clearly and often, in hopes of avoiding any confusion. Today, we just want to communicate the basic plan – again, the more we communicate it, hopefully the easier the transition. So don't be surprised when you see this information repeatedly.

Before I lay out the plan, a quick word. Council is well aware there are varying degrees of concern about this virus. We have relied heavily on what doctors and epidemiologists are saying about how this virus spreads and what the future of the pandemic might look like. As Martin Luther reminds us in his explanation to the fifth commandment, the fullest interpretation of the commandment not to kill is that, “We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need.”

ⁱ Given all of that, we have created this plan assuming two things:

1. The most vulnerable of our members will be in attendance.
2. Each individual is an asymptomatic carrier of the disease.

Assuming these two things is the best way to prevent transmission of the virus. There are already numerous documented cases the virus being spread among a gathered congregation, and we want to be as careful as possible to avoid this outcome. If you are uncomfortable with attending worship, do not feel guilty about staying at home the day we gather. If you think that all of this is an overreaction, please know that we made the decisions with the common good in mind, and indulge our caution.

Here is the plan:

We will gather once a month, ideally outside. The transmission of this virus reduces drastically in open air compared to an enclosed, indoor space.ⁱⁱ Each person will be asked to bring their own chairs. If you do not have a lawn chair, we will have extra available. Shade will be available. We will maintain social distance as much as possible, including being very careful about entering and exiting the building if rain forces us inside. If we are forced inside, seating will be marked with painters tape. For all of this, members of the same household do not need to social distance, it's distancing between household groups that is important.

Masks are recommended, because it reduces the risk of you sharing the virus, should you be asymptotically carrying it.ⁱⁱⁱ It reducing the risk of you sharing it by up to 60%, and is particularly helpful if you need to cough or sneeze. We ask that everyone wear a mask for the safety of others. Disposable ones will be provided if you do not have your own. Gloves are not necessarily recommended, because the virus attaches to plastic easily and the gloves only help if you can change them between every interaction with people or surfaces.

Singing increases the risk of sharing the virus so exponentially that we will not sing together when we gather.^{iv} We plan to still have some music. We will have the words to the hymn chosen in the bulletin, and the opportunity to meditate on the words while listening to the keyboard play the hymn.

We will have communion on the Sunday we gather together. This will be done with prefilled cups and wafers. I will go over instructions repeatedly when we are together, but here is the outline of what will happen.

During the service, if I can space it out safely, I will not wear a mask, so you can hear me. But during communion, I will put on a mask. I will preside over communion, and we will use prefilled cups. These function much like a creamer cup at a restaurant. Once we've finished with the prayers and words of institution, we will begin communion. People will come up one at a time, with 6 feet between one another. I, with my mask on and with plenty of hand sanitizer, will hand out the prefilled communion cups. If you need help opening the cup, I will help, using sanitizer before and after. Then you will walk 6 feet away, take communion, and throw the plastic cup and "lid" away in the trash can that's there as you leave. Hand sanitizer will also be available for you to use.

Again, gathering in the same space will happen one time a month. The other weeks of the month, we will continue virtual worship. This will go largely as it has gone the past few months, with a bulletin and link sent out ahead of worship. We will worship "together" virtually on Sunday mornings, but of course the link can be viewed whenever you would like.

By worshiping in this way through the worst months of the pandemic, we will:

1. Minimize risk while still gathering sometimes.

2. Give enough time in-between gatherings to know if we've caused an outbreak.
3. Not exclude those who can't come because it's too risky for more than a week at a time.
4. Have both communion and singing hymns as a part of our life together still, albeit differently for a while.

We will continue to communicate this plan, as well as any adaptations that arise. We ask for your continued prayers for our world, our congregation, and our Council during this strange and often trying time. With Christ as our cornerstone, we will get through this, and what a joyful celebration it will be when we can fully experience worship in the same space again!

In Christ,
Pastor Michelle

ⁱ Luther's Explanation to the 10 Commandments, Small Catechism

ⁱⁱ <https://www.erinbromage.com/post/the-risks-know-them-avoid-them?fbclid=IwAR3XcUOYiclkO6yebLpnmeIXHpfMkzUEfJIQE1GnFSV4izReeo62RyZtDXs>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/04/dont-wear-mask-yourself/610336/?fbclid=IwAR2PdIMDIJMGF11ZhjzT0oZEOcull1bJajj1KN83S1BTvbVYD5wnaLN_oA

^{iv} <https://www.drheathernelson.com/singingandcovid19?fbclid=IwAR2CzqGBUQQbI0-ytxLZgrT5Rq8sftPnabanQSXynI1E9YI2rGgMjyJKCYA>