

Monday, November 16, 2020

Dear Peaks Presbytery Community,

With the news about promising vaccinations, I am urging vigilance on the part of Peaks Presbyterians in the meantime. As winter approaches the impulse to move inside is strong. But the risks are increasing right now, not diminishing. We are most at risk when people gather indoors, for periods longer than 15 minutes at a time, with people interacting in close proximity, which is exactly what the church does in ordinary circumstances.

When and where to worship remains a session's decision. In the past, I've advised sessions to be sensitive to their pastors and church musicians whose discomfort with the risks may be stronger than their own. Recently, I've observed that congregations are deeply reluctant to turn people away who show up on a Sunday without masks; I've also observed masks slipping from nose to lip to chin in the course of a worship service. I am concerned that safe practices are becoming lax at a time when we need to be more careful.

If you worship indoors, please be vigilant about safe practices: handwashing, properly worn masks, and maintaining physical distances of 6 feet or more. Don't gather around food. Greet each other from a distance. And as hard as it is, don't linger after worship.

We are no less the church of Jesus Christ if for a season we need to play it safe – worshipping outdoors, in parking lots, via FM transmitter, Facebook live or YouTube or Zoom or whatever technological platform works best for you. Be in touch with Dave Baker, our communications director, if you need ideas that might work for you. Please continue to do what it takes to glorify God in a way that doesn't jeopardize people's health.

Loud singing and loud speaking amplify the spread of aerosols. Quiet speaking and singing are less risky. It is also true that the risks even of soft singing are amplified by the number of people singing together. Keep your masks on, but whisper sing. Better to sing at a safer whisper than to belt out your favorite hymns along with a sickening virus.

Jesus said to the woman at the well,

But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

We can do that faithfully even in the midst of a pandemic. We've been doing so adaptively since Easter of 2020.

Blessings,

Carl Utley, General Presbyter

All Public and Private In-Person Gatherings

(Virginia's Most Recent Order Regarding Religious Gatherings Mandated 11/13/20)

Individuals may attend religious services **of more than 25 people** subject to the following requirements:

1. Individuals attending religious services must be at least six feet apart when seated and must practice proper physical distancing at all times. Family members, as defined below, may be seated together.
2. Mark seating and common areas where attendees may congregate in six-foot increments to maintain physical distancing between persons who are not Family members.
3. Any items used to distribute food or beverages must be disposable, used only once and discarded.
4. Practice routine cleaning and disinfection of frequently-contacted surfaces must be conducted prior to and following any religious service.
5. Post signage at the entrance that states that no one with a fever or symptoms of COVID-19 is permitted to participate in the religious service.
6. Post signage to provide public health reminders regarding physical distancing, gatherings, options for high risk individuals, and staying home if sick.
7. Individuals attending religious services must wear cloth face coverings in accordance with **Amended** Executive Order 63, Order of Public Health Emergency Five.
8. If religious services cannot be conducted in compliance with the above requirements, they must not be held in-person.