

Dear Westend Family,

With Christmas Day approaching, many of you are asking about the possibility of in-person worship. It is something that each and everyone of us desires. In-person worship has been a reoccurring discussion at each of our Administrative Board meetings over the past several months. This past Monday night, Ad Board met. We invited the Shepherd Elders to discuss this topic so we could get their perspective and hear what their Care Group members have been telling them. It was a very good discussion. It was good to be able to share our decision making process with the Elders and our youth pastor, Brian. Know that we too miss that sense of community and we continue to look for ways to replace it!

Most of you will have heard about Cocoa and Carols this coming Sunday evening. It is an opportunity to have a s'more, fellowship with our church family, and hear a short mediation from Brian Myers. Also, I am pleased to announce that we will have an **outdoor, candlelight Christmas Eve service**. The details are being worked out so stay tuned for the When, What, and How. Be prepared to bundle up!

Regarding regular morning worship services, the Ad Board's decision is to continue to suspend in-person services through at least January 10th. At our January 11th Ad Board meeting, we will re-evaluate the current situation. We know this is hard to hear and trust that you'll recognize how very, very hard the decision is to make. We covet your prayers as each of our deliberations and resulting decisions regarding worship brings a measure of anxiety to each Board member.

We do want you to know the 'how and why' of our most recent decision. Some time back a committee established a road map for reopening. For a period, the plan allowed for in-person worship, but key parameters and understandings were established in the event conditions changed. We continue to monitor the state-wide and county-wide numbers and recommendations from state and local agencies. We are also in communication with other Classis GR North churches as to how they are handling the situation. The Board has periodically asked a couple of health professionals from our congregation to comment on the MDHHS information and react to the prospect of opening in-person worship. Here are some of their comments:

"Based on the MI start map, we are in phase E which should equate to minimally a 3 but more likely a phase 2 (persistent spread) in the MI start plan document we used to develop our plan. If that's the case, the plan as defined is to meet virtually only. We developed the plan for this purpose...to use as a tool to guide our decisions."

and

"Numbers of new cases appear to have peaked and are heading down a little but hospitals are still very full and we don't think we've had enough time to see what Thanksgiving bump we will have. Probably in another week we'll know if new hospitalizations are rising again. If not and numbers continue to fall, then perhaps we can get that option back in a couple weeks. I do feel that the format we had with required masking at all times inside and households seated 6 feet or more from each other is a low risk but right now, large group indoor gatherings are still a moderate risk with the current level of community transmission. Not all masks are medical grade and not everyone wears their mask correctly. Singing generates more droplets at a more sustained level and is a higher risk than casual conversation."

and

"The semi lock downs happen when hospitals are at capacity or sharply headed in that direction. Death rates go way up when you run out of ventilators and ECMO machines, etc. Hospitals that are overrun are not equipped with enough staff and resources to then handle non-covid health issues. We still are limiting non-emergency surgeries to have enough hospital beds for covid. Covid 19 is the leading cause of death in the US now."

Out of a deep desire to show love for others, our desire to demonstrate we are model citizens of two worlds and out of a desire to show respect and love towards our frontline workers, the Ad. Bd. has made the decision it has. We are, as always, continuing to monitor the situation. In the meantime, we are heartened by the hard work being put in by our staff

and volunteers to make this Christmas as special as possible.

We are in the season of Advent; the season where we look up and rejoice at Christ coming down to us. Jesus left the unimaginable love and joy of being with His Father to enter the darkness of our world. With this act He brought light, a light for all the nations. We must personally and communally look to His light at this time. The five candles of advent symbolize hope, faith, joy, peace and, of course, Christ. If ever we needed hope, joy, and peace, we need it now.

I end with these words:

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Christ is still with us (He never left). Christ still loves us (He never stopped). Nothing "in all creation" can change that.

Your brother in Christ,
Mike Terrell
Moderator

"Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." Martin Luther King Jr.