



When I am afraid, I put my trust in You. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me? (Psalm 56:3-4 ESV)

November 19, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ at Mt. Hope,

It has been a while since we sent out a formal update, but with the recent changes in the landscape of the coronavirus, as well as the recent orders from the Michigan Department of Health leading up to the holiday season, it seemed like a necessary time to be in communication with everyone. Our Dual Parish leadership group, comprising of the Congregational President/Chairman, Elders, and Properties/Trustees from both Trinity and Mt. Hope, as well as Pastor, met yesterday, November 18th, to discuss our current situation and what we anticipate doing going forward.

Please excuse the lengthy update, but we felt it necessary to communicate clearly the following: 1) *where we have been*, 2) *where we are now*, and 3) *where we see ourselves going*.

1) **Where we have been**: After postponing in-person services in March, we knew that our main priority would be to find a way to resume services in a safe and reasonable fashion. We have been holding in-person services at Mt. Hope since June 20th. We felt this has gone very well. We learned a lot as we went and continue to make changes and encourage safe guidelines for everyone to follow.

Gathering together in the midst of a pandemic is an inherently risk-filled thing. However, we also realize that church is not just another “social” event. It is a sacred time to receive God’s gifts of Word and Sacrament, therefore is “essential” for Christians. It is for our spiritual health, something that could easily be neglected as we focus on our physical health, which of course is also important.

For that reason we attempted to mitigate as much of, but not all, the risk of gathering together as best we could. We also continued to offer online services so that everyone could make the best decision for themselves according to their personal needs, health, and comfort level, and still be fed with God’s Word. Staying connected in some way, shape, or form is the most important thing, and we thank God that He provides us the means to do just that.

2) **Where we are now**: Case numbers of COVID-19 are on the rise across Michigan (including Northern Michigan) and the country, as are hospitalizations. It has prompted governments in many states to issue new orders or guidelines especially leading up to the holidays, when many people will be gathering socially. As Christians, we should honor and respect our leaders as we would God Himself (Romans 13:1). As long as laws do not violate God’s Word, we actually give a witness to our faith by obeying them. We encourage all of our members, and all Christians, to heed the guidelines our state is issuing in an effort to keep us safe.

However, Michigan has consistently exempted religious services, churches, and those attending churches from penalty. This is a good thing, as it allows us to continue meeting in a safe and reasonable fashion for all the reasons listed above. **In our meeting yesterday, our leadership group agreed that we should continue in-person services as we have been,** and then reconvene the leadership group again in two weeks to see where things stand.

Granted, we plan to continue in-person services while emphasizing two things. **First, every person can and should consider their own health and circumstances before deciding to attend church.** We understand that, for a variety of reasons, someone may not be comfortable being in a social setting at this time, and we would therefore encourage you to stay connected with our online services and Bible studies. Also, please contact Pastor if you need any spiritual care or conversation.

Second, we're asking that everyone remains vigilant in terms of their own health before deciding to attend church. For instance, if you're having any symptoms of a cold or flu, even mild ones, we would ask that you remain home. If you've recently traveled or been in large social settings, especially around the holidays, we would ask that you would consider remaining home for a certain period of time before returning to church. We can all help protect each other's health by taking that extra step of safety.

There is also an attachment to this letter with important reminders of our guidelines that we are following for in-person services. The most important among them are that we will continue to require masks, as well as observe proper social distancing from others, not gathering inside to converse, especially as we enter and exit the building. We look forward to the day when these guidelines will not be necessary, but for now, they are important.

Our leadership group also agreed that all other in-person church meetings and activities should be suspended for the time being, and groups should seek to meet virtually, if possible.

3) Where we see ourselves going: Obviously, the future is not ours to know. But we know the One who does know it and is in control! We are not people of fear, and we do not proceed in fear. We seek to be safe and reasonable, but we are not afraid. As mentioned before, we are looking forward to the time when this pandemic passes and we can slowly get back to many of the things we miss and love.

Right now, we are planning to continue Sunday services as they have been, at 11 am with communion. We had already decided to move all midweek services to online-only—Thanksgiving Eve and Advent Midweek. Right now, we are planning for an in-person Christmas Eve service, but we will continue to discuss it and update the congregation accordingly.

We are confident that with God's help, wisdom, and direction, we will be able to continue to navigate these difficult times and find the best path forward in His merciful care.

In the Peace of Our Lord and Savior,

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