

Dear Friends in Christ,

The time has come for decisions to be made about a pathway forward as we continue to endure an explosion of COVID-19 cases in our community and beyond. In the past ten days a number of strong recommendations, restrictions and concerns have surfaced, causing us to once again take a close look at our practices.

- As many of you are aware, two weeks ago the Bishop of our Susquehanna Conference sent a request to all Churches of our conference, that we immediately suspend all services and activities.
- Yesterday, Governor Wolf announced new protective mitigation efforts/restrictions that will take effect tomorrow (December 12) through the beginning of January. Although religious worship services are technically excluded from the Governor's gathering limitations, he is strongly urging churches to carefully weigh the health risks to their members given the immense amount of community spread of COVID-19.
- And, it has become very concerning that a number of folks within our congregation have recently tested positive for the virus. It is important to state that these cases have not been due to gathered worship. Symptoms for some are mild to non-existent, while for others they are hospitalized and facing a more difficult challenge. In addition to our folks with confirmed cases, several in our congregation, including three on the Praise Team, are currently waiting test results.
- But the most crucial reason for the pathway ahead of us is that the love of Christ compels us to love one another. Caring for members of our church family and making everyone else's safety our priority helps us love one another. Whatever we can do to slow the spread of the virus in our community helps us love one another. The time has come. We must do this.

After much anguish and many prayers, we have decided on the following for the balance of the Advent season:

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 13:

- The 8:00 AM service will be held. (This is the final in-person 8:00 AM service until further notice.)
 - The 9:15 AM service will be held; however, the Praise Team will not be offering musical leadership as three members are currently on quarantine awaiting test results. The morning message and prayers will be offered. (This is the final 9:15 AM service until further notice.)
 - The 10:30 AM service will be held. (This is the final 10:30 AM service until further notice.)
 - Worship Option: Worship online @ www.gotobethlehem.org
 - Poinsettias: Following each service on December 13, those who ordered poinsettias as a memorial gift or in honor of someone are invited to take their poinsettia with them.
 - *The Sounds of Christmas*: A CD featuring the 'Sounds of Christmas' (musical selections) has been put together for your enjoyment. Copies are available following each worship service on December 13th or can be picked up at the church office throughout the week. If you wish for a copy to be delivered, please call the church office: 717-244-1486. We will be glad to send one out.
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SUNDAY, DECEMBER 20:

- There will be no in-person worship service. Please plan to worship with us online @ www.gotobethlehem.org

Special Note:

- As we move back to all virtual worship, anyone needing technical help or wanting DVD's or CD's of the services should call the church office. Volunteers are ready.
- *A Walk-Through Bethlehem:* This event will be held entirely outdoors on the church grounds, weather permitting. All persons, couples and families are welcome to come anytime between 4:00 PM - 8:00 PM as we walk around the exterior of the church building, enjoying the displays and sharing in stories surrounding familiar Christmas songs and carols. It is important that you bring your smart phone(s) or tablet to this event, as songs will be accessed by code. There will be instructions to help guide us with this. Social distancing will be in practice. Face masks are required. (This event will be offered again on Christmas Eve during a different time frame.)
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THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24 - CHRISTMAS EVE:

- *A Walk-Through Bethlehem:* This event will be held entirely outdoors on the church grounds, weather permitting. All persons, couples and families are welcome to come anytime between 12:00 noon - 4:00 PM. It is important that you bring your smart phone(s) or tablet to this event, as songs will be accessed by code. There will be instructions to help guide us with this. Social distancing will be in practice. Face masks are required.
 - Christmas Eve Worship: All services will be virtual. We hope to be able to live stream both a contemporary service as well as a traditional service. This is going to demand flexibility on the part of our musicians, our technicians, and other participants, so we request your patience as we finalize these details. The services will also be recorded for viewing at later times. We will share more information as details are finalized.
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FRIDAY, DECEMBER 25 - CHRISTMAS DAY:

- Bethlehem's Community Christmas Dinner: The dinner will go on as scheduled, however, all service will be take-out/delivery. No table service will be available this year. Dinner will be served between 11:00 AM - 2:00 PM. All are encouraged to spread the word about the dinner among those friends and neighbors that might especially appreciate a full-course turkey dinner on Christmas Day. (No tickets required / no charge for dinner)
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SUNDAY, DECEMBER 27 WORSHIP AND BEYOND:

- Until further notice, all worship services will be virtual. Return to gathered worship will be matter of continued assessment. However, given the experience that our community and nation has had with the recent post-Thanksgiving upsurge of the virus, I am thinking our virtual-only worship may last until the end of January, if not longer, as a post-Christmas upsurge is predicted.
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ACTIVITIES:

Effective immediately (December 11, 2020):

- All non-essential activities are suspended, including classes, meetings, sports activities, etc. Please know that we have the capacity to do meetings by Zoom. We encourage all small group leaders, teachers, and committee chairpersons to call the church office to have meetings scheduled for you.
 - Common Grounds Coffee House is available for take-out only, until further notice.
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This is probably the hardest letter I have ever had to write to a congregation. I feel like the Grinch who stole Christmas. And yet, I am convinced that it is the right pathway for us. While we have done well in avoiding the Covid Virus as a faith family, in the past week it has drawn too close. Yesterday, the decision was made a bit easier.

In the meantime, we have every reason to continue our journey to the manger, where the hope, peace, joy, and love of God are on full display. So, continue on! The path does not end. In fact, the journey will go well beyond the manger, far beyond. We are followers of Jesus. We will go where He goes. We will do what he asks us to do.

First, hold fast to the faith that is in you.

Seek how you can best love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength in these challenging days. God is teaching us, so let us be attentive.

Second, now is the time, perhaps as never before, that God is teaching us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Find a need and fill it... find a hurt and heal it. Give yourself away, so others will come to know Jesus. (Perhaps, just as an example, you will consider dropping off a Christmas CD to a shut in, or delivering dinner to someone who is alone or in need.) Pay attention to what is going on in the neighborhood and what is happening with family and friends. Wear a mask, keep the distance between yourself and others, stay clean... We start there and move out in ever-widening circles in the ministry God has given us. The mission is where you are. Walk carefully, but boldly in the strength of the living Christ. The mission of the church continues, and every small act of kindness matters greatly and honors Christ.

Please know of my love for you and that my prayers continue for our ministry together. Hold steady. We are a people of hope!

KEEP SHINING BRIGHT BETHLEHEM!!

In the love of Christ,

Roger