

## Coming Back Together as a Congregation Guidelines

*Thus says the Lord: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers. - Jeremiah 31:2-4*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The COVID-19 pandemic reluctantly moved us into physical distancing. Then, as the number of cases and fatalities spiked, we ceased meeting together for worship and other activities, in order to protect the most vulnerable: the elderly and those with underlying health conditions. This has been a difficult act of love. Our goal was to keep cases to a minimum, so that hospitals would not be overwhelmed beyond their capacity.

In response to this health crisis, we have moved to online and public access broadcasts of our worship services and the use of online meeting platforms for all other “gatherings” of our members. Once cases begin to fall, we will continue to offer these new online and broadcast options for all our members even as we begin to meet again, with great care. **This is a roadmap to that hopeful eventuality.**

As you know, Governor Kim Reynolds announced a loosening of some restrictions already last week despite climbing numbers in our area. As of today, Black Hawk County leads the state of Iowa in the number of confirmed cases (1140 Confirmed, 307 recovered, 13 deaths), though churches are technically able to begin meeting again if they chose to do so.

### **The critical question many now have is: When will we restart in-person worship?**

The decision to begin worshipping in person again is one that will be made by our pastors and Church Council together, with careful consideration of the following:

- Legally binding orders
- The safety of our community and congregation
- Recommendations from health officials
- Recommendations from the Synod office
- Following federal guidelines for a three-phased reopening

Large gatherings are the most dangerous venue for a community-wide viral outbreak. We don't want to be the cause of a resurgence in our area. If one life is lost, in the congregation, or community, it is not worth it. In-person worship will likely resume at different times in different places. Resuming in-person worship will likely happen in three phases at Nazareth.

## What are the three phases?

A summary of the three phases is spelled out in an 18-page federal document on reopening. Before proceeding to these phases, the document says the following “gating criteria” should be met, in order to mitigate against resurgence and protect the most vulnerable:

- 14-days of declining symptoms
- 14-days of declining cases
- Hospitals able to treat all patients without crisis care
- Robust testing program in place for at-risk healthcare workers, including emerging antibody testing

Iowa has not seen 14 days of declining cases. Most of our communities are at least two weeks from implementing any of the phases below. When all of the above criteria are true for our region (Region 6 in Iowa), then elected officials and health experts in our area will begin with Phase 1. **In all phases, good hygiene practices like washing hands and wearing masks in public are strongly recommended. People who feel sick should stay at home, not go to work or to school. Social distancing will be important for the foreseeable future.** Here are the phases as they impact our congregation:

**Phase 1:** Once Region 6 has had 14 days of declining cases, Nazareth **may** choose to resume in-person worship, weddings and funerals with *strict* social distancing protocols (sitting every-other pew, six feet apart, no hand shakes, passing of the peace, etc.) and honoring existing large gathering limits. We will continue to strongly discourage vulnerable individuals (the elderly, immune-compromised, those with higher risk factors) from attending gatherings in person for their safety. No visits to hospitals or senior care facilities will be made in this phase. No Sunday School or youth activities will occur in this phase. We will continue to encourage church staff to work from home as much as possible. Fellowship activities will still be suspended. We will continue to stay in phone and email contact with our seniors and homebound members and as many of our families as possible.

**Phase 2:** Once Region 6 has had 28 days of declining cases without resurgence, Nazareth **may** resume in-person worship, weddings and funerals with *moderate* social distancing protocols, still adhering to large gathering restrictions that remain in place. We will continue to discourage vulnerable individuals (the elderly, immune-compromised, those with higher risk factors) from attending gatherings in person for their own safety. No visits to hospitals or senior care facilities will be made in this phase. Sunday school, camps, and organized youth activities may resume with social distancing. We will continue to encourage church staff to work from home when possible. Fellowship time and activities may resume with maximum social distancing. We would continue to stay in phone and email contact with seniors and homebound members and as many of our families as possible.

**Phase 3:** Once Region 6 has had 42 days of declining cases without resurgence, Nazareth **may** resume in-person worship, weddings and funerals with *limited* social distancing protocols. We would still discourage vulnerable individuals (the elderly, immune-compromised, those with

higher risk factors) from attending gatherings in person for their safety. Visits to hospitals and senior care facilities may resume with great care in this phase. Sunday School, nursery and youth activities could return with limited social distancing. Church staff may then work without restrictions. Fellowship may resume with limited social distancing. We would look to resume homebound communion.

### **In Closing**

There are no hard and fast dates we can give you by which we can safely re-open. Instead, it is vital that you stay tuned in to our weekly congregational updates and communication. As always, it is our love of neighbor that guides us. We intend to err on the side of caution. Thank you for your faithful prayer and financial support of this ministry and mission that we all share through Nazareth and please do not hesitate to contact us directly with your questions or concerns.

**Be well! Be courageous! Be loving! Be The Church!**

In the Strong Love of Christ,

Pastor Brian