May 19, 2020

**To: Message to Members and Friends of First Presbyterian Church of Bend**

**From: The Session and Pastoral Team.**

We send love and care to each of you, and trust you, your families, friends and loved ones all have been keeping safe and well. The Covid-19 Pandemic continues to turn our world and our lives upside down. So many lives and our common life together has been profoundly impacted. We have entered arguably the most dangerous phase of this global pandemic. We are all tired of physical isolation and the sacrifices being asked of us. The virus is not tired.

We are grateful Oregon is taking direction from skilled scientists and health experts concerning reopening. At First Presbyterian Church of Bend, we have resisted the language of re-opening because we were never closed. Our hearts have remained wide open and we have continued to faithfully follow the most important command which is to love God and to love our neighbors. Our outreach to the most vulnerable and marginalized in our community and world has never wavered. Our online worship services continue to reach significantly more households than our in-person services have in the past. We continue to stay connected and care for one another. Your faithful and generous giving is helping us continue to be good news at a time when it is so needed.

We have thoughtfully examined the Oregon Phase-1 “Re-Opening” step taken for Deschutes County by the Governor and the Oregon Health Authority experts. Phase 1 contains an awareness by scientists and health experts that the number of cases of infection in our community is likely to rise, and thus the risk of infection will increase. The Session believes staying the course adopting a cautious and conservative approach to opening the building and resuming in-person worship stays true to our commitment to love and care for the welfare of our members, friends, guests, as well as the larger community. This is not fear-based but what we believe is the clearest expression of a Jesus-shaped love that is willing to sacrifice and be inconvenienced for the sake of protecting others’ health and well-being. The Session has prayerfully given consideration to how we will phase back into activities at First Presbyterian.

For at least the 21 days of Phase – 1, the Session has endorsed the following safe practices:

1. We anticipate holding only online worship services through the summer. We will regularly assess this as conditions change.
2. The building will remain closed to all activity, including renters, until at least the end of Phase – 1. While gatherings of 25 or less are permitted in Phase 1 guidelines, we believe gathering for meetings and activities in person is potentially dangerous for our members, friends and community members, especially those in high-risk populations. In order to respect the needs of all, we will continue all meetings virtually and encourage small groups that wish to meet to wait until at least Phase-2, and after we have evaluated risks at that point. The staff is available to assist you if you desire assistance to hold virtual gatherings.
3. The office will remain closed and staff are encouraged to continue to work from home. If you need to get in touch with someone on the staff, this will continue to be via email or phone. The staff is eager to work with all ministries finding creative ways to do ministry given these restrictions.

Session encourages anyone with questions regarding building access at this time to contact the Building Access Task Group: Sherry Smith or Boyd Levet.

Here are the key questions and guiding principles we used in our discernment and decision-making:

1. We believe to love God is to love our neighbor. Our intention is to always hold in the highest regard the health and safety of our members, friends, guests, as well as our larger community.

We will make decisions that are in service to the health and safety of the greater whole.

1. We will follow the example of Jesus giving particular care for those who are most vulnerable and at risk.
2. We will always follow, at a minimum, any guidelines put forth by the Governor, the Oregon Health Authority and the CDC.
3. We may choose to be more conservative than allowed by these guidelines if we have reasons

to believe it would be in the best interests of our members, friends, guests, as well as our larger community.

1. We affirm the Apostle Paul who said, “When one suffers, all suffer. When one rejoices, all rejoice.” (1 Cor. 12.26) We will strive to remain as inclusive as possible considering all those who could be affected by our decisions.
2. There are important theological questions to consider like who would be welcome and who wouldn’t and how does that fit with our theology? How will we enforce rules and restrictions and how does that fit with our theology?
3. Do we want to use the resources of time, talent and treasure available to us to figure out protocols and practicalities for opening buildings in a way that might keep people safe but is not guaranteed and will put some at risk and exclude others from the gathered community? Or, do we want to use the resources of time, talent and treasure available to us to creatively respond to the needs in our community and world until it is safe for all people to return to our buildings without restrictions?
4. We will revisit these guidelines and our current policy frequently based on updated information and guidelines and keep the congregation updated.

These guidelines are written knowing that we all are anxious to come together in person. But for now, we feel a tremendous responsibility to make decisions that are in service to the health and safety of the greater whole. We believe that we will continue to thrive as a community and continue to be the presence of Christ’s love to the larger community and world as we hold each other’s well-being in our decision-making, especially those most vulnerable and at risk.

We are reminded in our Baptism that we belong to God and in belonging to God, we belong to each other. May we remember that we are Easter people who trust suffering, darkness and death do not have the last word. God does! And the word God speaks is of a love that will prevail. If love isn’t winning, it just means the story isn’t over. May we continue to tell God’s story of unwavering and unconquerable love in our faithful and creative response to these challenging times.

**Members of Session:**

Brian Cash, Joel Clements, Laurie Craghead, Clerk of the Session, Christina Davenport, Connie Heath, Steve Hummel, James Jaggard, Mike Maidl, Kat Mastrangelo, Don Mercer, Cynthia Serra, Gretchen Williver

**Pastoral Staff:**

Rev. Dr. Steven Koski

Rev. Kally Elliott

Rev. Morgan Schmidt

Plenty is available online for reading material.  Here is a small sampling:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gsiD3kLMhxtE68wXlt4Z-aSF-kCYvdcQ/view>

<https://mailchi.mp/dee3db97e944/planning-for-the-future>

<https://www.cascadespresbytery.org/when-will-things-open-up-again/>

<https://www.post-gazette.com/news/faith-religion/2020/05/15/How-can-worshippers-keep-from-singing-They-may-have-to/stories/202005120043>

[https://www.timesfreepress.com/news/local/story/2020/may/13/ringgold-church- now-linked-three-covid-19-cas/522858/](https://www.timesfreepress.com/news/local/story/2020/may/13/ringgold-church-now-linked-three-covid-19-cas/522858/)

<https://calgary.ctvnews.ca/i-would-do-anything-for-a-do-over-calgary-church-hopes-others-learn-from-their-tragic-covid-19-experience-1.4933461>