

The last six months have certainly been an unprecedented time for the family, the community and the church. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed life as we know it. And yet, we walk in faith because we have an unchanging God [Malachi 3:6] and a Savior who is “*the same yesterday, today, and forever*” [Hebrews 13:8]. But we realize this hasn’t been an easy time for anyone and we’ve made decisions, and been the recipients of decisions, that have been difficult to handle. It has been the same for us as elders of First Christian Church. At the end of March, we made the tough call to shut down onsite worship and offer it online. Thirteen weeks later, we made the decision to regather onsite in conjunction with online worship services. And now we face another decision.

As with most churches at this time, our onsite worship attendance is down significantly. Our current average is just less than half of what it was prior to the virus. And due to the growing number of COVID cases in Cass County, we’ve seen a real decrease in the past month. Online worship participation is also down significantly since our regathering date. Our belief as shepherds is that online worship is a great tool to reach new people – and for that reason we will continue to provide it – but we do not believe it is the answer for attaining and sustaining real church growth and ministry. Simply put, we cannot minister to people the way we need to through online worship. The reality is that personal problems and societal ills are increasing while church attendance is decreasing. We see that as a matter of great concern. But there is something powerful that happens when God’s people gather physically. The book of Acts [a history book of the early church] highlights the impact of the early believers as they lived out their faith in their community, but it also underscores the life-changing power of God as they gathered together on the Lord’s Day for worship. And Hebrews 10:25 warns us to “*not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*” Special things still happen when the family of God gathers together for worship and encouragement.

The decision we are announcing at this time is motivated solely by a desire for people to return to onsite worship. In order to learn why people haven’t returned to in-person worship, we spoke with a great number of people and several people voiced the same concerns. There were concerns with proper social distancing and sanitizing between services. But the issue raised most was the fact that they didn’t feel comfortable gathering for worship with others who aren’t wearing masks. So, motivated by a desire for people to gather physically for worship, and doing what we can to help people feel safe in doing so, we are implementing the following plan. We will double down in our efforts to properly social distance while in the building and to adequately clean and sanitize our facility. Beginning October 4th, we will *require* those attending first worship service to wear a mask while they are in the building and we *recommend* to those attending second service to do so also. The same will be required for teachers and students attending our 252 children’s program in the cafeteria. Personal Note: There are a lot of masks being produced out there and we are asking that you refrain from wearing a mask that has any potential of being “divisive or distracting”.

We believe that offering up worship to God through singing is a fulfillment of God’s command to do so and that it was an important element in both Old Testament and New Testament worship. In Psalm 100:2, we’re told: “*Worship the Lord with gladness; come before Him with joyful songs.*” In Ephesians 5:19, Paul exhorts: “*Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord.*” So we will be having congregational singing at both services. Those attending first service are asked to leave their masks on while singing. And

again, this is recommended at second service but not required. Of course masks will be removed to partake of communion. Anyone on stage who is singing and/or speaking will not wear a mask while doing so. We feel an important part of communicating the spoken word and leading others in worship involves facial expression. In addition to this, the distance from the speaker and/or singer to the closest attendee is about 15 feet, a distance greater than what's recommended by the CDC.

We didn't arrive at these decisions quickly or easily. A great deal of thought, prayer, reflection, and discussion preceded them. And again, motivated only by a sincere desire for people to return to in-person worship, we're in full consensus that this is the best plan going forward. Space doesn't allow us to go into detail about all that was discussed while making these decisions. In order to provide you with more information, we will post a video and a FAQ's document on our website and Facebook page this week. A few of the questions will be: *"Why not start a third service where masks are required?" "Why did you choose first worship as the service requiring masks?" "How long will masks be required at first service and what criteria will be used for the 'All Clear' sign?"*

We aren't naïve enough to believe that everyone will agree with what we have decided. And we understand this because opinions vary on the issue of mask-wearing in response to the pandemic. As we have all discovered, some have very strong opinions on the matter. In fact, it's become a divisive issue in government, the community, and even in the church. And we are pleading with you to not let that be the case at First Christian Church. Seek unity, not division. If we can't get past wearing a mask, how can we experience and extend to others the wonderful grace and love of Christ? Practically speaking, the decision we've made allows for everyone to attend a worship service they feel safest in, understanding things can never be done perfectly, despite our best effort.

Speaking scripturally, when it comes to matters of opinion and/or personal preference, we are mandated to yield to fellow believers and to keep the mission from Christ as our top priority. In Philippians 2:5, we're told to *"have the same mindset as Jesus in our relationships with each other."* Before that, Paul said: *"In humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others"* [Philippian 2:3-4]. Humility prevents us from insisting on "having it our way" and allows for unity and harmony in the Body of Christ. In Romans 14, after a lengthy discourse by Paul warning us not to insist on doing something we have a right to do [matters of personal preference] if it causes someone else to stumble, he urges us in verses 19-20 to *"make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification and not to destroy the work of God for the sake of food"* – a hot button issue in that day. Masks are a hot button issue right now, but we must not let it disrupt or destroy what God is doing at FCC.

Paul shares his heart in I Corinthians 9:22, when he says: *"I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some."* Shouldn't that be our heart's desire? Who knows? We might reach someone who is seeking God in the midst of this pandemic and societal unrest if we provide a place of worship that is loving and welcoming – and safe. As your shepherds, we love all of you with the love of our Great Shepherd. Please know that any decision made is in keeping with our ministry and our mission to *"bring people to an ever-growing relationship with Jesus."* If you have questions or concerns, feel free to contact any one of us. Oh, and keep praying for us!

In His Service and Yours – FCC Eldership

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