

## ***Humble Considerations on Regathering***

### **PRAYER**

*Father in heaven, you alone are wise. You alone are sovereign. We entrust our lives to your care because you are worthy of our trust. We are a people who are sorrowful yet always rejoice. We grieve sin, the effects of sin, and the result of sin. We grieve the pain sickness brings, the sorrow of abuse, the trauma of poverty, the unrest of conflict. We rejoice in your sure Word, in your better hope, in your certain return, in your pure new creation. In these times, we are certain that we are not wise as we thought, we are not powerful as we thought. Though suffering and affliction have been all around us, because we felt safe, we were blind. But now it seems all we see is grief, anger, confusion, anxiety, fear, affliction, suffering.*

*We have a choice. We can turn to you in dependence. Or we can turn to self in defiance. We ask for the humility to trust you. We ask for the wisdom that leads away from fear, anger, bitterness, mistrust. We ask for the grace to seek the good of others.*

*As we consider how to regather as a congregation we ask for clarity, humility, unity, wisdom and the grace to avoid foolish error even if unwittingly. Give us patience. And allow us to be sensitive to the various ways people have been and will be affected in the coming weeks, months, and years.*

*We are confident not in us, but we are confident in you. If you did not spare your own Son for our sin, then surely you will give us all things for godliness. If death could not hold your Son, then surely nothing can separate us. Your church has survived according to your power, and she will endure by your grace through your means for your glory.*

*We pray all this in Jesus' Name, AMEN!*

### **GENERAL INTRODUCTION & BIBLICAL INSTRUCTION**

I want to begin with some biblical instruction I think is relevant for the question of regathering. This is not entirely about the larger question of re-opening especially in terms of business. I am after is to help us answer the question, "How should Christians, and especially Pleasant Oak Baptist Church, think about regathering in this crisis as it stands currently?"

People may have diverse thoughts and even personally conflicted opinions about this whole situation. We acknowledge how this situation affects people personally with the loss of work, health care, anxiety, isolation, and many other countless ways. The purpose of this presentation is much narrower the regathering of Pleasant Oak.

In general, I acknowledge that the Coronavirus is a real public health risk. While in our county the numbers are low it does not mean that this virus is not deadly and dangerous. There is so much that we just do not know about this virus. What we do know gives reasons for caution and humility.

In NYC the number of confirmed deaths from COVID-19 is greater than deaths on 9/11. If this were a sudden disaster that happened quickly most would not question the prolonged urgency. Although the shutdown seemed sudden, this crisis is prolonged. It is easy to find ways to explain away the urgency needed. I would encourage us to continue take this seriously, while giving freedom to opinions about how to operate in society safely.

I know that there are many competing opinions and positions, especially thinking about the issue of religious liberty and state orders and guidelines. These voices will be getting louder as more and more churches begin to gather corporately in our country, state, and county. Some will do so in cooperation with local government, in defiance of both state and local government, some following the general guidelines for mitigation, others will do so in defiance of those guidelines.

I want to help us interpret and think through these questions so that the congregation has a framework to make decisions concerning regathering. I am not a health expert and will not pretend to be. I will listen to what health experts especially local officials are saying. I am also not a politician and will not pretend to be one. My role, and the role of church leadership, is to shepherd in how we function as a church in the coming days and years.

The passages I think particularly relevant are Romans 13:1-7, 1 Peter 2:13-17, Titus 3:1-2, 1 Timothy 2:1-8, and Hebrews 10:24-25. The first four passage deal with Christians relation to governing authority. In every case the attitude is that of submission and humility even toward hostile authority. Romans 13:1-7 is very clear God has given the state certain authority, therefore we are to submit to it. When the state exceeds the authority God has granted, we submit to God. But where the state is operating within the authority God has granted, we are called to submit to it. From Romans 13:1-7 we have an obligation to submit to governing authorities who have restricted large gatherings including churches.

What we are facing in the COVID-19 restrictions are not persecution. Are there overreaches from government, yes. But in these cases, the government is seeking to control a virus that has deadly consequences and dangers for society, even if they do that poorly in terms of religious liberty consideration.

In our country we thankfully have freedom to work with and influence our government. Where we can work with them to develop guidelines for how we can safely gather we should to that. This is already happening. We should not be belligerent, demanding, or antagonistic.

In the other passages, instruction is given to pray for governing authorities. The goal is to live peaceably so that there are as little hinderances to the Gospel. One hinderance can be a reputation of being an unhelpful citizen. It is one thing to suffer for doing good and speaking truth. 1 Peter 2 makes it clear it is another thing for suffering for doing bad, for using freedoms for evil, including the spread of a dices and misinformation from a spirit of fear.

We have examples from the early church during times of dices not unlike ours. The church refrained from gatherings, although not ministry. Indeed, the response of the

Church to care for one another and the community was a shining light in contrast to the pagan society that withdrew and cared only for self. In later church history Martin Luther, who was no coward or afraid to suffer for doctrine, urged Christians to refrain from gathering to limit the spread of plague and in order to remain useful in serving the community; we cannot serve if we are sick. Even in our own country during the Spanish flu in 1917/1918 churches did not gather for a time to help slow the spread. Though many things are unique to these times, we have examples about how to respond faithfully.

Hebrews 10:24-25 also clearly calls for corporate gathering. Some use this passage to say we must gather in defiance to state orders. I think this is a wrong interpretation. Hebrews 10 is addressing the willful neglect of corporate gathering when the church IS gathering. What we are faced with is the church being unable and choosing not to gather for a time, though we desire to. Hebrews 10 is not talking about temporarily refraining from gathering in compliance to governing authority and love of neighbor with the full intention of gathering again.

There are ways to be faithful to Hebrews 10:24-25 while not gathering in corporate formal ways. For example, we can still call and write to exhort one another to love and good works. We can still study God's Word over the phone and online. We can even find safe ways to meet in smaller gatherings to encourage each other.

So yes, we should desire to gather. However, Hebrews 10 does not give us license to ignore state orders. We can be faithful to the spirit of Hebrews 10.

We are trying to hold these two things together, cooperating with governing authorities while also fulfilling God's design and intention for how the Church should live as a corporate body for the sake of faith and perseverance.

## **CATEGORIES OF CONSIDERATION**

These are categories of consideration I and the deacons are using as we make plans and decisions about next steps. We ask that the whole congregation keep these considerations in mind as you provide feedback, concerns, ideas, and questions. While I and the deacons are providing leadership and direction, this is not a top down process we desire to hear from you. Please help us.

- 1) Pastoral – We seek to be sensitive to the spiritual needs of the congregation, especially the need to fellowship, prayer, and instruction. We seek the best ways to meet these needs while following guidelines for safety.
- 2) Evangelistic – We seek to be sensitive to our witness to the community and community leaders. By gathering too soon do we send a message we do not care about the health of our neighbors, or that we are looking after ourselves, or that we are disrespecting governing authorities? Corporation can strengthen our witness.
- 3) Ethical – We seek to be sensitive to the concerns about spreading the virus not just in our congregation but also in our community. There have been numerous examples of gatherings where gathering contributed to spread and lead to deaths.

We have an ethical obligation to not be cavalier and arrogantly ignore what our officials are warning about. Yes, the “curve” may be flattened, but there is still risk of a spike.

- 4) Authority – We seek to follow the commands of Scripture with all wisdom. We want to submit to governing authorities who have an interest in protecting public health, while also being faithful to what the Bible says about the Church.
- 5) Local/State – At this point we are seeking to be mindful of what the state is saying in terms of orders and guidelines, while also giving weight to what the county is saying. In this re-opening stage, the dynamic between local and state authority is going to be confusing and a moving target. We cannot get bitter but should remain patient and wise.

## **LOCAL UPDATE**

As many know El Dorado County was one of the earliest counties to be officially approved to move fully into stage 2. There was a lot of work that went into making that happen. We should be thankful for the hard work of our county leaders including the county health officer, Nancy Williams and hospitals. The reason this was granted is because of the low number of cases in our county relative to population, including no deaths or ICU cases. In addition, the county demonstrated testing capabilities that would enable them to notice if a spike was happening and respond to slow the spike.

Another factor in allowing El Dorado County to move to stage 2 is the fact that large percentages of people have followed the mitigation orders and guidelines. This personal responsibility is important for the county to remain on track, limit cases, and also help business reopen and churches gather again. Some people are adopting the attitude that the government cannot tell us what to do. I would encourage us to look at it differently, if these mitigation efforts can help the state and especially our county avoid having to regress and stay open and churches meet, then let us do it out of love of neighbor. If we don't want the government to tell us what to do, let us show ourselves reasonable and responsible.

Some may be wondering if COVID-19 may have already been in our county and if they have already had it. The county health officer, Nancy Williams, had an interesting perspective on why that may be unlikely, though not impossible. She noted that of the hundreds of tests performed of suspected COVID-19 cases, including at the county tests sights, there were only a handful of positive tests. If the virus had been in our county undetected, she would expect to see a much higher number of positive tests. This leads her to believe that there is no herd immunity in our area and so many still remain susceptible to the virus.

It is understandable people are upset and anxious about the shut-down. People are faced with so many hardships in so many different ways. As a church we should acknowledge the complexities involved from the consequences of wrong and bad decisions, the massive amounts of data being looked at to make decisions, the layers of

government and how levels of government interact with each other. My point is that as a church let us be humble, patient, and gracious when it comes to how and when we open and are permitted to regather. Many people are working very hard in a very fluid situation.

Local pastors are working to draft some proposals and a letter to send to the state with the assistance of the county on how churches can safely regather and hopefully be permitted in stage 2. Currently the state has lumped all religious gatherings into stage 3 without accounting for the diversity of congregational size and ability to implement mitigation procedures. Also, the state as of today (May 13) has said that no county could move to stage 3 until all counties are ready for stage 3. LA County just extended its stay-at-home order for another 3 months, so it appears that if things hold stage 3 in re-opening plan would be a way away. I am hopeful that IF churches can demonstrate unity in willingness to follow mitigation efforts showing how they can do actually do that, the state will be more flexible.

That being said the state has okayed drive-in gatherings and it is possible that smaller gatherings where protocols are in place and followed, may be permissible within stage 2.

### **WHAT TO EXPECT MOVING FORWARD**

Again we want to be sensitive and gracious to how people may feel about the issue of re-opening in general and regathering as a congregation. We will be a humble church seeking to act in good faith. We will be cautious in our regathering efforts because the consequences of getting it wrong are tragic. We also want to avoid moving too quickly and having to regress. I will continue to be engaged on a local level as I am able so that we can take into account local considerations.

With all that said here is what we want to prepare the congregation for in terms of possibilities and what the deacons are working through in planning and preparedness. **At this point we do not have a time-table.** I share these possibilities to get us prepared for how our gatherings may look and to encourage you to think of other ideas or concerns.

Our approach will be gradual.

We may start with outdoor or drive-in type gatherings, which would have to be limited in terms of number in some way possibly using some kind of RSVP system.

A possible next step would be smaller group gatherings at the church throughout the week maintaining social distance. These gatherings may have to be controlled perhaps dividing the congregation in some way so the same group is meeting together and caring for one another. These smaller gathering would focus on reading Scripture and prayer much like our worship filled prayer times. A sermon would still be posted online.

When we get to a place it is safe to gather in larger groups, we may have two services with livestream in the fellowship hall to further allow for spacing.

Throughout these steps we will also have to implement some cleaning procedures, and mitigation guidelines. We would encourage folks to follow guidelines being given in terms of Personal Protective Equipment like gloves and masks. The purpose in all this is to seek the good of others and be charitable to one another.

Again, we do not have a timetable at this point. We will follow closely the information coming from our county in terms of cases and guidance and take into account the state guidelines. We do hope to lay out a more specific plan and guidelines for the congregation in the coming weeks. And hopefully work out a way that we can begin some form of fellowship in safe ways. But these are the things and the approach we are consider.

Please pray for wisdom and unity in making these decisions. Continue to remain patient. We will need to continue to reach out to one another and seek to encourage each other.

### **WAYS THIS CAN STRENGTHEN THE CHURCH**

To close I want to remind us of ways this can strengthen us.

First, our desire and hunger for gathering can be strengthened in this time we are unable to gather. This I pray will make our commitment to gather stronger and the fellowship sweeter since we do not take it for granted.

Second, we have an opportunity to be light, showing a better hope, joy, peace, stability, and comfort.

Third, we can actually grow in our daily fellowship as we reach out to one another with phone calls, cards, texts, emails, social distancing visits. The need for daily encouragement is evident in these days and I pray we can continue to build new habits in this way. Part of our plan will include concrete ways to foster this kind of congregational care through the members.

While there are many challenges in these days, we can take heart in the truth of the Gospel. The Bible gives us all that we need to walk in wisdom. I am thankful that the ethos and convictions of this congregation can enable us to thrive and continue to grow even in these days because we are committed to the Bible and practicing our faith according to what Scripture priorities. For example our worship filled prayer practice gives us great flexibility in how we do a “service” and how we fellowship.

So be encouraged. God is God. The Gospel is true. Jesus lives. The Spirit indwells. And Christ is coming. Let us remain faithful as we wait for our Lord.