**Metrocrest Presbyterian Church**

Plans to Resume In-person Services

Greetings in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord!

We, the Session of Metrocrest Presbyterian Church, have been grateful for those who worked so diligently to facilitate the live-streaming of our worship services so that our members and regular attendees could stay home during the onset of this pandemic. Without their assistance and efforts, we would have been left with little sense of identity as a church body during these times of isolation.

While we think it is too soon to resume all our normal activities, we would very much like to offer the opportunity to worship in person again as soon as is reasonable and practical. We believe that time has come, with certain prudent limitations and restrictions. Therefore, we intend to offer the option of either continuing to watch worship services via Facebook Live or joining us in our facility as we assemble to worship our mighty God and risen Lord, beginning Sunday, May 17th, at 10:15 a.m. Also, we will have our called Congregational Meeting after worship on the 17th to elect members to the Pastoral Search Committee and to consider a refinancing proposal.

First, though, we want to be very clear and cautious on one point: if you and/or your loved ones are in the high-risk categories because of age and/or immunodeficiencies, **please do not** feel obliged to attend in person. We plan to continue offering the option of viewing our services through Facebook Live, so you are most welcome to remain at home to safeguard your health and welfare. In-person attendance should be reserved for those whose health is not seriously compromised by assembling with others.

Second, we are sensitive to the fact that the country, and perhaps the world, can largely be categorized in two different camps: one that wants to re-open as soon as is reasonable, and the second that wants to wait as long as is necessary to receive assurance that the pandemic has been mostly managed. If you fall into the second category, we do not want you to feel compelled to act against your reasonable concerns for your safety. If you believe it would be better to remain at home, for whatever reason, **please do so**. No one will disparage your concerns, and we will respect your decision. Under normal circumstances, it is expected that a true Christian should join with others in worship, but these are not normal times. We will honor your decision; we just hope you will try to understand ours.

Live-streaming has been a blessing for maintaining some sense of community during times of isolation. We have noticed the comments on Facebook about the meaningfulness of seeing a broadcast worship service from our facility. There is one small problem, though. It is only a temporary substitute for the genuine article. It can never fully replace the assembly of the saints. We were meant, as much as possible, to worship together, in a certain location. While acts of Providence can preclude that worship for a time-being, we should come together again for mutual edification as soon as is reasonable and prudent.

Therefore, we intend to offer the opportunity, for those who are healthy, able, and willing, to meet as the “called out assembly”, beginning on May 17th. While doing so, though, we intend to take the following precautions:

* Our cleaning crews will resume normal cleaning schedules to help provide a clean, relatively safe environment.
* We will have hand-sanitizer stations posted just outside the front doors for people to use before entering.
* We will have one set of the exterior doors propped open, and the second set opened by greeters to ensure that people do not have to touch a common door to enter.
* We will ask that members maintain, as much as possible, the six-foot “social distance” gap from other members who are not of their immediate family.
* We will ask that members refrain from handshakes, fist bumps, and hugs during this time. (I know; this is most difficult for some!)
* Our Staff will prepare, print, and place bulletins on seats in advance, so there will be no need to take one from a common basket.
* We ask members to avoid congregating in the foyer, to help maintain social-distancing protocols, and to ensure a safer ingress/egress route for those who may be concerned about contracting a contagion. If folks wish to chat before and after services, we suggest moving to the exterior of the building to provide adequate space for social-distancing needs. We ask members to do the same while inside the auditorium.
* All Sunday School classes are still canceled; and no nursery will be provided during our services. This will be an opportunity for families to worship together.
* We will not serve refreshments or beverages, and the water fountain will be out of service.
* Exterior restroom doors will be altered so they can close without latching. This will allow members to push on the door with their feet to enter the facilities.
* Hand sanitizer will be available outside the restrooms so you can utilize it, as well as washing your hands before exiting.
* If you wish to wear a mask and/or gloves, please feel free to do so, but neither will be required. This option will be left strictly up to each individual.
* The worship area will be altered to allow seating only on every other row of chairs.
* Families and groups of two or three who wish to sit together certainly should, but please keep two seats between each family or group to ensure safe distances.
* We discussed the receiving of tithes and offerings and concluded that we believe it should be an integral part of our worship still. However, to avoid cross-contamination as much as possible, we will ask ushers to carry the collection baskets down each empty row between occupied rows. This will allow members to deposit their offerings into the basket without having to touch it or pass it to the next person.
* We are hoping to serve communion in a similar fashion on May 24th, with the wafers placed in individual containers as well.
* Small groups (care groups and women's ministry) can meet at their discretion, but please practice social distancing guidelines.
* Finally, if you show any of the symptoms in the "Governor's Report to Open Texas" guidelines, please do not come. These include: cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, chills, repeated shaking with chills, muscle pain, headache, sore throat, loss of taste or smell, diarrhea, fever or a measured temperature greater than or equal to 100.0 degrees Fahrenheit, known, close contact with a person who is lab confirmed to have COVID-19. Please do not come to worship if you are feeling ill at all. Please just stay home.

In conclusion, we believe that living necessarily entails certain risks. We can and should do all in our power to reduce those risks as much as possible, but we can never expect to eliminate them altogether. According to some statistics, 3,287 people on average die in vehicular-related crashes across the globe each day – 1.2 million a year. Thus, the very act of traveling to and from the church building produces a certain risk. We can wear our seatbelts, obey traffic laws, and practice our best defensive-driving skills, but putting a one- to two-ton vehicle in motion automatically puts us and others at risk of injury and/or death. It is simply not possible to escape risks entirely, so we have to ultimately trust our lives and well-being to our gracious, compassionate, and loving Father. We believe it is time for the healthier among us to do the same in regard to actual corporate worship, and we invite those who are healthy to join us.

Finally, one of the realizations that has stemmed from the pandemic response is that the church is not a building; instead, it’s the people who meet there. That is thoroughly accurate. The building, often referred to as the church, is merely provided for convenience sake.

The tales of the Scottish Covenanters have long been fascinating. That faithful flock of stalwart Presbyterians who were forced from their historic buildings by the English king because they owned that Christ alone was King and Head of his Church. They would gladly honor the English king in the civil realm, but they would never admit a rival to his Supreme Majesty, Jesus, in the spiritual realm, be he pope or earthly king. When their faithful ministers were expelled, the people joined them in a new chapel – the caves, glens, and moors of the Scottish wilderness. There, often in inclement weather because it better hid their locations from the English dragoons (soldiers) sent to persecute them, they raised their voices in prayer and praise, heard the ministry of the Word, and received the sacraments.

Our Presbyterian forebears would have been safer if they had simply restrained their worship to their own homes. Well, they definitely believed in and practiced family worship around each of their hearths, but they were also resolved, as much as possible, to join in joyful assembly with the hearty Scots of like, precious faith who knew the importance of the church as a corporate body. If they could have met in their appointed chapels and cathedrals, they would have gladly done so. If not, then the outdoors, even in a cold, pelting rain, would be their cathedral, with watchmen set to warn the flock in case of the approach of the British soldiers.

We do not face their fears when we assemble, but I could wish that I could spend one service with them, despite the dangers. It must have been amazing to pray and sing and worship and hear the ministry of the Word from the likes of Samuel Rutherford, Donald Cargill, or Richard Cameron in one of those hallowed glens.

Yes, the church is not a building, but it is the assembly, whether inside or outside of any building, and we believe it is time to assemble again.

“I was glad when they said to me,

‘Let us go to the house of the LORD!’”

* PS. 122:1

In humble reliance and dependence upon the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,

the Session of MPC