

To: The Pastors, Sessions and leaders of Yellowstone Presbytery Churches
From: George and Kathy Goodrich and the Leadership Cabinet of Yellowstone Presbytery
Date: April 22, 2020
Re: Important Recommendation on The Re-Gathering of Yellowstone Congregations for Worship

We recognize this Covid-19 season has been difficult for all of us. We are weary of the isolation; are missing worship and opportunities to be and serve together, and may be grieving the loss and devastation of jobs, businesses and communities and even lives lost. Today Montana Governor Steve Bullock announced Phase I for the re-opening of the State. **In Phase I he granted the option for churches to re-gather, but under highly restricted, specific circumstances and ONLY when they can ENSURE all directives and precautions WILL be provided by the organization/ employer and followed by ALL present (Read ALL of the statement regarding employers as well or your church might be legally liable).** Those circumstances include:

- a. Everyone over the age of 65 (CDC says 60) or with *any* compromised health conditions is to continue sheltering in place. This restriction impacts many of our members and a large number of our pastors.
- b. Physical distancing (minimum six feet) *must* be maintained, including entering buildings, in lines, where people sit, stand... Who will be the enforcers in a gathering?
- c. Groups should not gather in numbers larger than 10. (Phase 2 goes up to 50.) How do you decide who may or may not enter after more than 10 show up?
- d. Churches and businesses MUST protect (PPE required?) sanitize and maintain the disinfecting of their facilities, high traffic locations and restrooms (each use by a person is a risk event). Most churches do not yet have a plan or the staff, paid or volunteer, who are *trained and in place to adequately fulfill these and other requirements*. Please read 24 Questions Your Church Should Answer Before People Return, attachment & CDC.
- e. The local public health officials are mandated to oversee and ensure compliance at any and all gatherings, workplaces...

While all of us are weary of the isolation, we strongly recommend that each church and pastor continue to meet virtually for worship for Phase 1. (See small group option below)

Why? To give church, session and pastor time:

1. To develop a solid, specific plan for safety and compliance with the directives of government and health officials (i.e. ALL employers are REQUIRED to screen employees for health symptoms before they may enter a workplace.)
2. To address the "24 Questions" for re-entry, plan which is attached. And There are many more?
3. To provide for staged and hybrid worship and options as *all* our churches have members/regular attenders, or a pastor, who are in the high risk categories and will not be able to *safely* return to large group worship/gatherings for an unforeseen time as no one knows for sure if/when we will experience a second wave of the virus.

4. To begin to dream and ask how God is working GOOD in the midst of this? How is God calling us to do church in new and hybrid ways going forward (integrating in-person AND virtual, more participatory ways, re-engaging the power of smaller gatherings, think the book of Acts?)

We have the unprecedented and needed opportunity to learn from and adapt to the new things God is up to and wants to do in and through us! It is exciting that ALL our congregations now have more worship attenders or visitors *online* in worship than they *ever* had coming into our buildings! What might the Holy Spirit be saying? The old normal has passed away. Our NEW NORMAL will need to include old and new priorities and ways of being and doing church. Let's explore not waste this moment!

Our next communication and presbytery gatherings/meetings will provide us all with exciting resources and possibilities. Please watch for it and share. We knew you needed *this* ASAP.

Small Group option – If some in your congregation want to gather with others, some churches in the country are suggesting they follow the practice of the early church in Acts and gather in groups < 10 in a home/yard on a Sunday morning to join together in virtual worship/study followed by discussion of the scripture, prayer, BYO coffee, and following *all* safety/health protocols above.

Perhaps some will disagree with our recommendation – and we can understand. We all have been cooped up, are lonely and grieving the change in life rhythms, relationships, work. We now know how important it is to BE together! But, the loving, Christ-like response as the body of Christ is to lovingly sacrifice and care for one another as Jesus commanded (John 13;34,35), to look out for and protect the needs of the weak and vulnerable. As the Apostle Paul observed, “All things are lawful for me,’ but not all things are beneficial” (I Corinthians 6:12). So, let's not rush. God is at work and not in a hurry. Let's continue to meet virtually for a while.

This recommendation is the result of extensive research, consult and listening, praying. We have been attending Zoom meetings on this matter in the state and across the country, as well as reading widely, including the fine print from the governor <https://covid19.mt.gov> and CDC, listening to the needs of our churches... Our recommendation is the same as that of Glacier Presbytery, the ELCA (Lutheran), the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist, the Disciples of Christ, and the Episcopal Churches. We know that perhaps some independent churches or some with different affiliations may be “open” this Sunday. If so, we wish them well, but are concerned for the safety of their parishioners, as *few have had time to plan, take precautions, ensuring safety and compliance.*

***So let's hold off, at least for this brief time,
to allow the picture to become clearer,
to allow sessions to meet and form a plan for safe re-entry and the emerging realities,
to explore how we are being invited to reflect and explore God's new priorities, practices
and opportunities to join the Holy Spirit in the new things and mission God has for us, Isaiah
43:19.***

Letter sent email on 4/23/2020 from Goodriches

And let's be praying for one another. Covid-19 is far from over. God has MUCH for us to learn.

***Our God, who is our refuge and strength (Psalm 47) also says,
See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland! Isaiah 43:19***

In the peace, power and hope of the resurrection. We are a resurrection people!
George and Kathy Goodrich, Leadership Cabinet, PMT Co-Mod's of Yellowstone
Presbytery

*Our website has links to information for your church in these times and to all the government and health websites @ <http://www.yellowstonepcusa.org/coronavirusinfopage.htm>

*Fine print 4-22-20 from the governor <https://covid19.mt.gov>