

COMING BACK TOGETHER IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC

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As the restrictions imposed to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 are being lifted, Venice Church is preparing a plan for re-opening our ministry to more in-person activities. I will admit that the past two and a half months have been some of the most challenging in all my long years of pastoring churches. And yet, there is still hard work to be done in the months ahead. We want to make sure that our re-opening process does not in any way undo any of the good work we've all been doing over the past few months.

Washington County has been blessed to have relatively few cases of Covid-19 so far. We want to make sure that Venice Church does all that we can to keep it that way. We are making careful plans that will follow state health department guidelines for public gatherings. Those plans will involve clear and simple arrangements to facilitate social distancing within our building. They will also include a well-thought out and effective protocol for cleaning and sanitizing the building after each gathering. We are also laying out a clearly stated set of expectations for how social distancing guidelines will be observed in our gatherings, addressing such things as handshaking, hugging, and mask wearing.

We are seeing a widening divide in our country over how to balance matters of public health and safety with concerns over the economic well-being of our communities. Some are eager to lift shutdown and stay-at-home orders as soon and as widely as possible. Others are eager to keep those restrictions in place much longer. Hostilities are rising on both extremes.

But the truth of the matter is that no one living today has ever had to deal with the situation we are faced with. There is NO clear and obviously right way forward in this situation. This is new territory for us all. People of good faith can and will have different views as to how best to navigate these complicated and uncertain challenges that are facing our society and our church. I expect everyone at Venice Church to recognize that and to show each other grace.

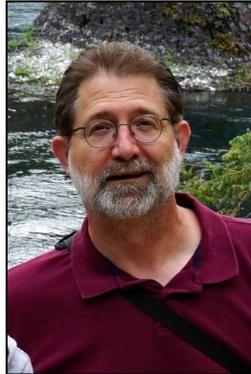
In the coming days and weeks, the Church session will be laying out a plan for restarting in-person activities at Venice Church. There will certainly be aspect of that plan that will not be entirely

pleasing to everyone. That will be for us an excellent opportunity to practice being patient and bearing with each other in our differences. It will be a time for us all to work at growing in the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). It will help if we can be very clear about the motivations behind the process for making that plan.

◆ **Selfless, gracious love must be the defining characteristic of everything we do and of all our relationships with each other.** If you have been following my regular video meditations on Romans 12— see my YouTube channel—“[Pastor Gary’s Video Notebook](#)” (starting with #24)—you’ll have heard me talking about this topic of love.

God wants his people not to conform themselves to the ways of the world but rather to be transformed by him (Romans 12:2). According to the apostle Paul, the defining mark of a transformed character is love—selfless, gracious love (Romans 12:9). That love is to involve sharing our lives with our fellow believers who are in need. It involves an energetic hospitality that welcomes the stranger (Romans 12:13). It involves blessing and not cursing those who disagree with us, offend us, or even who persecute us (Romans 12:14). It is a selfless love that is more concerned for the needs of the other person than for our own needs (Romans 12:10). This love will be the defining characteristic of Venice Church’s re-opening plan.

- ◆ **The plan will put a high priority on addressing the needs and concerns of those among us who are particularly vulnerable and at-risk—“the least of these my brothers and sister.”** We will not be driven by our fears and anxieties, but we will lean toward the side of caution. We will not make decisions out of fear, but we will take seriously everyone’s concerns about their health and safety. We may ask some to take precautions that they do not believe are necessary in order to make room in our gatherings for those who do believe those precautions are necessary.
- ◆ **Caution will be a guiding principle.** A friend and colleague of mine shared this thought early in March, “Five years from now we will be saying one of two things. Either we will be saying, ‘We were more cautious than we needed to be,’ or ‘I wish we had been more cautious.’” For the life



and ministry of a church, it is better to err on the side of caution in this kind of situation. For a state or a nation or an economy, that calculation might well look very different. But we are not managing a state or a nation or an economy. We are trying to guide a church through a time of crisis. Caution will be our guide.

- ◆ **It is important that our plans and practices show to our members and to the community around us that Venice Church is seriously committed to creating and maintaining a healthy and safe environment for ministry.** To that end, our re-opening plan will take seriously the recommendations of the CDC and the state Health Department, as well as advice from the EPC General Assembly offices and professional organizations and associations and our own insurance company—resources that provide important and wise guidance for various aspects of church ministry in this time.
- ◆ **Nothing in the plan should be seen as a political statement.** The political wranglings that have inappropriately inserted themselves into our response to the Covid-19 crisis have no bearing at all on how we shape our Venice Church re-opening process. Everything in the plan will be aimed at creating a safe church environment in

which God's people can joyfully come together to worship and fellowship. It will not be shaped by anyone's political agenda. Our re-opening process will be one that strives to honor Jesus Christ and love his people.

These have been two and a half very long months, and there can be no doubt that we have still some long weeks and months ahead of us. We are all getting a bit grumpy. I'm getting a bit grumpy. A lot of people have put in a lot of hard work during this time to make sure the ministry and mission of Venice Church have continued in an effective and faithful way through this crisis. They have done wonderful work. It would be most disappointing to find division breaking out among us and ruining all that fine work just as we begin to come back together.

Love and mutual respect are crucial to the faithfulness and fruitfulness of the church. This is now our moment. This is our time to shine as lights in a dark and divided society. Now is our time to show that following Jesus makes us different. We are a people of selfless love, people who set aside our own concerns and interests in favor of the concerns and needs of others. If we do that, we will come out of this dreadful time as a church of remarkable power and beauty.