

## REOPENING CHURCH

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Wednesday, May 26, 2020

Governor Abbott is opening up the economy here in Texas on May 31. We had our first in-person worship service Sunday, May 17, at FBC Gatesville and are opening the church office June 1. We are making plans to do childcare and other in-person events going forward.

The lockdown is over for many of us. We are back at work, going to restaurants, and attending church services.

But things are different, also. The crowds everywhere are smaller, capacities are limited, many people are wearing masks when they go to public places, and social distancing is a new norm at most all retail outlets.

Recent surveys indicate that most people are still reluctant to experience crowded conditions, and many plan to avoid public gatherings until 2021.

Church gatherings have always involved handshakes and hugs. The Apostle Paul suggested in four of his letters that we should greet one another with a “holy kiss” (e.g. Romans 16:16).

It’s a new day for church everywhere. Viral infections have been traced to worship gatherings, choir practices, weddings, and funerals. Most churches have removed pew Bibles, hymnals, and envelopes from their worship centers, and most have stopped passing the offering plates and Lord’s Supper trays. Most are discouraging hugs and handshakes and urging people to stay at home if they have symptoms of the disease. Some are checking their parishioners for fever before they enter the building.

We have most of these measures in place at FBC Gatesville. We have roped off every other pew. We have hand sanitizer, masks and gloves readily available. We are disinfecting surfaces regularly and urging people to maintain social distance.

The complications of these practices are evident. Passing a microphone from person to person, for instance, has infected an entire group of public officials here in Texas. Our church is recognizing graduating seniors this week. But we are not passing a microphone down the line as we have done for years.

Every plague has political and social repercussions as well as medical dangers. By definition a plague involves the community as well as the individual. Decisions about treatment, personal protective equipment, and social behavior impact not only the individual but the people nearby. The disease is contagious.

Everyone is doing the balancing act, not just political leaders. Each person is trying to decide how far out they will step under what conditions. Some will go to HEB but not Walmart. Others have it in reverse. Some hang out with family but not strangers. Others are avoiding contact even with family members for the time being. And some are being instructed by their loving family members to remain at home and away from all other people as much as possible.

Our congregation is like all others. We have members on both extremes of the continuum between stay-at-home and go-back-to-normal. Churches have always had lively conversations, disagreements, and even conflict. What many churches struggle to maintain is peace, what Jesus prayed for in John 17:21: “that all of them may be one...so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

Friends, this is going to take a lot of grace for a long time.

If we can keep our collective composure in a world so full of strife, our love for one another will help people believe the good news about Jesus. That’s the reason our church exists in the first place—so others will come to Christ.

“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3).

Scripture: Romans 12:1-12

Prayer: Dear God, help me to be an example of grace in my church. Keep me calm when others are troubled. I pray for an inner peace that transcends the trouble in this world. May I represent you well today.