

Dear Church,

Each week I check in with the San Joaquin County Public Health Department to review their COVID data and consider our church and its programs using our shared Methodist lens of:

Do no harm
Do all the good you can
Stay in love with God

In late November as the latest COVID variant began to emerge in the public consciousness I asked the staff to plan for our programs to move to a more fully remote approach in anticipation of a possible surge in cases. This step was designed to allow for continuity in our programming while ensuring a posture of responsiveness to a possible surge in case rates that might necessitate further restrictions.

Here is a quick snapshot of the case rate per 100,00 people:

Date rate per 100K

1/3 21.2

12/22 11.3

12/15 11.1

12/8 11.1

12/1 10.9

The obvious concern is the substantial jump in cases from just before Christmas to today. While the period is longer than the usual week the rate of change is a cause for concern. With that in mind I have asked staff to continue remote programming using our tools like ZOOM for the next couple of weeks out of an abundance of caution and to ensure that we do no harm.

We will continue to suspend Fellowship Time after church for the next two weeks and evaluate the ongoing state of our county in terms of case rates and hospitalizations as the test for a resumption of that precious time together. At this point I think the earliest possible return would be late January BUT that is only if the numbers drop back to our previous levels around 11 per 100,000.

I am not anticipating a suspension of in person worship at this time. Of course this is subject to public health directives and Annual Conference policies. But I would imagine that we will be able to continue in person worship. I continue to be in consultation with Ric Campero on the best practices for both the Choir and Congregational singing. Ric is a fabulous partner in ministry and I look to him for clarity on what is best in our mission to do no harm as regards singing together.

It may be that our next step in worship would be to suspend the choir and maybe

congregational singing but we are working on our own internal standards for that decision in real time. What I do want to stress is that we will be conforming to best practices and a high standard of safety! Please know that we consider worship absolutely essential to the life of our church as are you, our congregation! We will balance our shared health and safety while recognizing the critical nature of our gathering for worship. In short, we will work to do no harm and to do all the good we can while staying in love with God through worship!

With that spirit in mind, I want to commend to you the following guidelines for our shared time together.

- Mask wearing is essential and must include covering the mouth and nose - of course we understand that there are those in our midst whose medical conditions necessitate exceptions BUT being uncomfortable in a mask is insufficient reason for lack of compliance. Please model for one another proper mask wearing!
- If you have any cold or flu symptoms at all in the interest of loving our neighbors, **you must** elect to join worship online until your symptoms have passed and you have a clear covid test in compliance with current guidelines. If the financial burden of a COVID test is significant for you or your family, please reach out to me at the office and we will work to provide assistance in obtaining a test for your use.
- We are a community of mutual support and accountability so our expectation is that we will, with grace and love, hold one another to a standard of doing no harm that allows us gently and with love to invite each other to be very careful and mindful of doing no harm. We are not to confront people about mask wearing or apparent symptoms but rather are to express christian concern for their wellbeing and invite them to recall our mutual covenant to do no harm.
- Should we move to a more restrictive regime it is critical to recall that God has been with us thus far and God will continue to be with us as the journey unfolds! We are not alone even when it seems like we are and in the event of additional restrictions we will be providing online support and care services for our membership through zoom and phone outreach so that we continue to strengthen and celebrate our connection and care for each other.

The office remains closed to all but essential visits. Should you visit the church for an essential reason your mask must be worn from entry to exit of the building at all times. I would note that Susie and I work in the office in our respective spaces unmasked with the door closed so when you see us unmasked through the window, please recognize that our office spaces are carefully managed to ensure our mutual safety and health. We will be working remotely with planned overlapping time to allow our administrative work to be effective while also maximizing our efforts to "do no harm."

Finally friends I know we are all heartily tired of this whole COVID thing in far too many ways to count. I would remind you that together we traveled through advent a season of Emmanuel "God with us!" God has been with us throughout this journey and will continue to companion us during this ongoing odyssey! This month we will be piloting

some additional communications to help us keep and nurture a sense of connection during the uncertainty of these days. We will also be offering and trying some new programming to try to and enhance our shared and valued sense of community and connection. These will not be perfect but we will continue to try together to maintain our vitality and spiritual grounding in God who loves us, who has never failed us, and who remains steadfastly and lovingly with us!

Peace
Pastor Mark