

May 20, 2020

Dear Members of St. Stephen's,

Grace and peace from God, our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

As you know, these last couple of months have been a tumultuous time as all of us have tried to carefully navigate our way through the changes in our landscape due to the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19). There is still much fear, worry, and anxiety about the virus and what it means for our everyday lives. Maybe the greatest part of the anxiety is the unknown, not to mention all the information and misinformation that leaves many of us wondering what to believe and what are the best practices to keep ourselves and those that we love safe. This issue has become highly divisive as people have started to take sides and cast judgment on those that have differing feelings about the virus, proper precautions, and how to live in the midst of this pandemic.

As the church, we have done our best to help in these chaotic times by offering worship, devotions, and various gatherings through electronic means. Congregational communication has increased as we've tried to keep in contact and offer as much help as we can in a properly distanced way. We thank the congregation for all the ways that they have continued to participate, support the church financially and otherwise, support one another, and be "People of Christ Making a Difference" to a world around us where many are in need.

A few weeks ago conversations started about the possibility and appropriateness of reopening businesses and society at large. Countries, states, counties, businesses and individuals have all taken part in these conversations with many different outcomes. All of this has led to more confusion, leaving many to wonder what is the appropriate response? At St. Stephen's, we convened a COVID-19 Advisory Board consisting of our church staff, executive committee, and a few other congregational members with expertise in business, medical practice, law, and law enforcement to help navigate this delicate subject of reopening. After meeting multiple times the board felt it appropriate to recommend a plan of reopening to the church council. This plan, which was formed based upon the recommendations of our Synod, the Governor, SCDHEC, and the CDC, was introduced at our May 17<sup>th</sup> Church Council meeting. After much discussion and prayerful consideration the plan was approved unanimously by the council members. Here are the details of the plan:

**Timeline:**

- In-person worship services will begin in June in the gym, starting with our Wednesday Eucharist service on Wednesday, June 3<sup>rd</sup> at 12:30pm.
- Worship services will be held in the gym on Sundays at 8:30am and 11:00am and on Wednesdays at 12:30pm. Worshipping in the gym offers a more conducive context for social distancing, multiple entrances and exits where people can properly space themselves coming and going from worship, and an easier space to clean and disinfect between services.

**Special Request:**

- We request that the Wednesday Eucharist services (12:30pm each Wednesday) be reserved for those who are considered at-risk.

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119 NORTH CHURCH STREET  
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TELEPHONE 803-359-6562  
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### Virtual Worship Services:

- Virtual worship options will continue for those that do not feel safe or cannot attend in-person services.
- The Sunday 8:30am and Wednesday 12:30pm worship services will be live-streamed and then made available to view on our YouTube channel at [tinyurl.com/SSLCWorship](http://tinyurl.com/SSLCWorship).
- Please don't forget that you can download the weekly bulletin from our website ([www.sslc.org](http://www.sslc.org)) to help follow along with the service. This may be especially important as we move from recording to live streaming the services because when we live stream we won't have an opportunity to include as many graphics of the worship liturgy.
- If you don't have the ability to access our worship services online and would like to request a dvd of the service and/or a bulletin please contact the church office and let us know. We can make it available for pickup, mail it, or drop it off at your house.

### Other Church Activities:

- There will be no other church activities allowed on campus at this time including Sunday School, Bible Studies, fellowship times or events, civic groups, small group meetings, choir practices, etc. until further notice.

### Social Distancing and Other Recommendations:

- Please keep yourselves socially distanced at all times while on campus, especially as you proceed to and from worship.
- Hugging, handshaking, and any other physical contact are strongly discouraged.
- It is highly recommended that each worshipper wear a mask and keep it on for the duration of their time on campus.
- If you are one of those that are most at-risk of detrimental effects from contracting the virus, you are encouraged to stay home. Staying home is a faithful response. God will still be with you. God will still love you. Your fellow congregation members will still love and be here for you.
- If you or a member of your household are sick, please stay home and take the proper precautions before going out in public and/or returning to worship.
- If you have been exposed to the virus, please stay home and take the proper precautions before going out in public and/or returning to worship.
- Please wash your hands, avoid touching your face when out in public, cough into your elbow or a tissue, throw away the tissue immediately, bring hand sanitizer with you and use it frequently, and do anything else that can help keep from spreading germs.

### Parking:

- If you are able, please park in the big parking lot adjacent to the cemetery.
- Handicapped parking and a drop-off for those with limited mobility will be offered in the small parking lot and circle drive, respectively.
- We ask that no one park in the circle around the fountain so that it may be used for dropping off those that have limited mobility.

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#### Worship Seating:

- Socially distanced pods of chairs have already been arranged in the gym.
- Ushers will be strategically positioned to help parishioners from their cars to their appropriate seating.
- Each family will be seated in a separate pod of chairs.
- The nursery will not be available so children are asked to remain seated with their families.

#### Changes to Worship:

- The sharing of the peace will be replaced with a moment of silence to pray for those who are in need of God's presence and peace.
- There will be no congregational singing (hymns or liturgy), as the action of singing has been deemed a "super spreader" by the medical community at large. Musical interludes and anthems will be offered throughout the service in place of congregational hymns.
- Children will stay seated with their families during the Children's Sermon.
- Offering plates will be positioned at the entrance and exit doors of the gym.
- We are still working to try and make Holy Communion a part of our worship services.
- At the end of worship, each pod of seats will be excused individually at appropriate socially distanced intervals to proceed to their vehicle. Please do not stop and socialize in the hallways so we can keep contact to a minimum and social distancing a priority.

#### Cleaning and Sanitizing the Building:

- All doors will be propped open. Please refrain from touching surfaces unless absolutely necessary.
- After each worship service the gym, all chairs, all bathrooms, all frequently touched surfaces including water fountains and door handles, etc. will be cleaned with CDC recommended agents to disinfect the facility before the next group of worshippers arrives.
- To ensure that all areas being used are properly cleaned and disinfected, we will be limiting access to the rest of our campus by either locking or blocking doors to certain areas. Please be mindful of this and help us by only accessing those areas that are open and made available.

#### What if Someone Who Attended Worship is Diagnosed with COVID-19:

- The church will notify the congregation about potential exposure while maintaining confidentiality as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
- We will be taking a picture of the congregation at the beginning of each service so that we can inform those who were in close proximity of the person infected. We would ask those persons to stay home and self-monitor for symptoms and follow CDC guidance if symptoms develop.
- We would advise sick staff or congregants not to return to the facility until they have met the CDC's criteria to discontinue home isolation, as found here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/steps-when-sick.html>
- The church will close off areas used by the sick person and will not use that area until after cleaning and disinfecting, hopefully waiting 24 hours to clean and disinfect to reduce the risk to individuals cleaning. If it is not possible to wait 24 hours, we will wait as long as possible before cleaning and disinfecting.

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### Understanding The Risk and Making Your Own Decision:

- A part of living with COVID-19 in our world means we have to understand the risk that we take when we leave our homes and go out into public. The same risks apply as we gather for worship.
- Please be aware that we cannot guarantee you a risk free environment while worshipping with us. We can try to mitigate those risks as much as possible, but without fail there is still a risk.
- Each person has to make their own decision about what risk or risks they are comfortable with. Please understand that if you believe the risk is too great to return to worship that this is also a faithful response. God will still be with you. God will still love you. Your congregational members, those attending and staying home, will still love and be here for you as well. There will be no shame or judgement in deciding to stay home. Please make the best decision for you/your family.

### The Future:

- If and/or when it is appropriate, decisions will be made about taking further steps to return to a more normal worship routine including returning to the sanctuary, reintroducing congregational singing, etc.
- If at any time the virus starts to make a resurgence, please understand that for the safety of its members the church leadership may elect to return to an electronic only worship platform.

We know that there is no way to please everyone when developing a plan of this nature, especially when thoughts and feelings about what is "right" are so personally and passionately held. With that said, we believe this to be our most appropriate way forward at this time. The leadership of St. Stephen's will continue to keep watch and make adjustments with the safety and well-being of our members as our number one priority.

As always, if you have any questions or need anything during this time please don't hesitate to contact us by calling the church office (803-359-6562), emailing one of the pastors ([pat@sslc.org](mailto:pat@sslc.org) and/or [jason@sslc.org](mailto:jason@sslc.org)), or calling the crisis care line (803-808-6471).

In closing, we want to share with you something that we wrote in one of our earlier letters that remains true today, especially as we take a big step in learning how to live a more public life with the health and safety of ourselves, our families, and our neighbors on our minds:

There is no doubt that all these changes are scary and unsettling. In the midst of such turmoil we are called to remember that God is with us. No virus can change that. We are reminded that even in the chaos that we have a purpose and a mission. Jesus proclaimed that the two greatest commandments are to love God and love our neighbor. One way to love our neighbor is to do what we can to prevent the spread of this virus. Another way we can love our neighbor is to check on them, pray for them, and help them as we all are trying to navigate uncharted waters. Together we will pray and persist, trusting that God is with us always and remains the ultimate source of our hope and peace as we live to be "People of Christ Making a Difference".

In Christ's Love,  
Pastor Pat and Pastor Jason

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