

Returning to Our Buildings – NWWA Synod Recommendations

June 10, 2021

Dear Beloveds of Northwest Washington Synod,

Truthfully, this has been a year like no other that I have lived through. More Americans have been lost to COVID than to WWI, WWII and the Vietnam War combined. Thirteen trillion dollars have been drained from our economy – costlier than 20 years of war in the Middle East. It has disrupted the church, too. As we emerge from this pandemic it is good to consider what we learned and where we are headed as we journey together as congregations and ministry sites of the Northwest Washington Synod.

First and foremost, we rely on God. In Isaiah 43:19 we read, *“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.”* In Jeremiah 29:11 we read, *“For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”* As we read and reflect on these scriptures, I invite all of us to trust that these promises of God are true. God’s Holy Spirit continues, over and over, to bring about new things. God’s preferred future for all of us is hopeful and bright. Let’s embrace the new thing that Jesus is doing among us!

As we begin to plan for re-opening church buildings, I encourage you to plan carefully, thoughtfully, and faithfully.

I strongly encourage that you as you reflect and plan on how you are Church Together in this time, to not rush to in-person gatherings. Have your decisions be intentionally based on objective criteria provided by public health officials in your particular area of the synod and the guidelines from the state. For instance:

- Some of you might be able to experiment with gathering:
 - o i.e. You are a small congregation, in a large facility, with a mostly vaccinated population, in a place where COVID is not as much of a concern.
- Some of you are not able to gather yet:
 - o i.e. You are a larger congregation, with a smaller sanctuary, with a diverse population (children, adults, seniors), in a place where COVID is more concerning.

Of course, there are other considerations, these are just some of them. But please be aware and thoughtful as you consider re-opening.

I encourage you to base your decisions about in-person worship on the values of ***Faith, Facts and Love***.

- Have FAITH that Jesus is with you in the midst of this and cares about your congregation even more than you do!

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- Look to those whose vocation it is to collect and evaluate FACTS (physicians and public health officials) for information about risk.
- LOVE your most vulnerable neighbors by designing your plan with their interests in mind. (This includes how you welcome “vaccinated” and “unvaccinated” people in your sanctuary and church building.)

Focus especially on what draws your congregation into relationship with others in your local community. See if you can emerge from the pandemic with a reputation as a church that cares for others above yourselves. Remember, the church building is not the only place where ministry happens. It is instead a hub for ministry in your whole community.

Dear Beloved in Christ, you are all in my prayers each day. I continue to be amazed by your resiliency, your compassion, your justice-oriented ways, your generosity, your patience, and your faithfulness. The Holy Spirit is clearly moving among us!

Let us pray:

O God, where hearts are fearful and constricted, grant courage and hope. Where anxiety and infectious and widening, grant peace and reassurance. Where impossibilities close every door and window, grant imagination and resistance. Where distrust twists our thinking, grant healing and illumination. Where spirits are daunted and weakened, grant soaring wings and strengthened dreams. All these things we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Thank you for your partnership in the Gospel!

In the Love and Peace of Christ,

Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee

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