



“For the Foreseeable Future”

On May 18, the Session adopted a working plan for phased re-entry aligned with markers outlined in the statewide Illinois Recovery Plan. Every succeeding month, the Session has reviewed and adapted our working plan to changes in our state and community. The Coordinating Commission of the Presbytery of Chicago provided early advice to refrain from commencing in person worship before August 30. In the meantime, we held a congregational online forum following worship on June 28 to lay out the Session plan and seek feedback from the congregation about gathering for worship and other ministries. The vast majority of participants affirmed delay of in person worship until phase five of the Illinois Recovery Plan. As the end of August approaches and the Autumn season begins, this communication outlines some of the rationale behind our approach “For the Foreseeable Future,” (a term we are borrowing from our friends at the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago).

What do we mean by “For the Foreseeable Future”? It means that we envision the following decisions guiding our life together until the pandemic situation meaningfully changes, which most likely means until Chicago moves into Phase 5 of the reopening strategy and until there is highly effective treatment or prevention widely available for COVID-19 or until there is the elimination of any new cases over a sustained period of time. This deliberately open-ended timeline recognizes the unpredictable nature of the pandemic and assumes that flexibility will be required to adapt accordingly.

We would like nothing more than for there to be a definitive end or “until” date for these decisions, but **while our impatience with pandemic implications grows, the realities behind our current situation remain unchanged.** COVID-19 is as present today as it was when we closed the campus back in March; the virus remains as virulent now as it was then; and we have no idea when that might change.

With that as context and with our conviction that our choices and actions are expressions of how we love God and neighbor and how we protect the most vulnerable among us—

These are our practices “For the Foreseeable Future”:

Worship: There will be no in-person worship. We will continue to premiere our worship weekly at 10 a.m. Sundays on YouTube. We are already working to incorporate into those services the helpful

suggestions and supportive and encouraging feedback that many of you have offered in our forum and along the way.

In coming to this decision, we acknowledged several realities about in-person worship and how it would be experienced during the time of COVID.

- **In-person worship is recognized as a super-spreader event.**
- **We would have to turn people away.** Capacity limits as well as safe-distancing requirements mean we could no longer welcome all; we could only welcome some. That means that for those who didn't know they had to register in advance; who didn't have the technological access to sign up beforehand; who were visitors; who might have come by on a whim to look for a new church home—their experience of First Pres would be one of being sent away.
- **We would have to determine who could—and who could not—be in the Sanctuary** on a particular day. Would it be those who could sign up the fastest? Those who have been members the longest? Or perhaps those who are newest to our community? What would we do about people in high-risk categories who wanted to attend? Would every one of our more-than 1,000 members get a chance to attend once before anyone could attend twice?
- **Entry to worship would be procedural** rather than a time of greeting and fellowship. There would be the lining up 6' apart outside the building; verifying those in line are on the "approved" list for the day; completing waivers, health questionnaires, and contact tracing forms prior to entering the Sanctuary; ensuring everyone is wearing a mask; taking assigned seats from front to back—thus passing no one along the way to greet; sitting only with those with whom one is safely sheltering; and being separated by empty pews between those seated ahead and behind.
- **There would be no bulletins, no hymnals, no Bibles, and no opening procession.**
- **The worship leaders and preacher would not speak so much directly to those present** but rather to the cameras, through which the majority of the congregation would be joining in worship.
- **There would be no choir**, since singing is considered a super-spreading activity. There would only be one soloist, positioned behind the congregation and singing away from them.
- **There would be no congregational singing, unison speaking, or passing of the offering;** the congregation in the Sanctuary would be silent observers.
- **Ushers would become not greeters but safety-compliance monitors**, having to ask people to leave if they take off their masks or in other ways do not follow safe practices.
- **There would be no time of fellowship following the service.** People would leave, pew by pew, back to front, and immediately exit the building and head home. There would be no passing anyone and offering a hello; no standing to chat; no greeting the pastors; no Coffee Hour.
- In other words, it is difficult for the in-person experience of worship during a pandemic, particularly for a congregation of our size, to be anything but an **exclusionary spectator activity that is at once impersonal and isolating**. We know that is far from what all of us hunger for in worship. We also know from our conversations at the summer picnics, in our online forum, in committee meetings, that there are things that we already are and can be doing in online worship to create a sense of intimacy and community, of connection and sacred space, of

moving music and stirring word. We are focusing on all of those things in this season as we remain committed to being a welcoming community of faith, ensuring that at First Pres everyone who would like to worship with us can actively and meaningfully do so.

Weddings and funerals: In order to be present in the life-changing moments of our church community, we are working with families and are considering new procedures with our Worship Committee and Session.

Programming: We are planning programming for the fall that can be accomplished online and in safely designated “pods” of members sharing common precautions and agreement.

Thus, on-site programming will be limited to the following list, with that limitation reevaluated if the situation changes or new needs arise. Everyone entering the church building will enter by the Church Office door on Douglas, sign in and out, and record their temperature.

- **Individual meetings with pastoral staff:** One-to-one or couples pastoral counseling can take place on site when deemed necessary.
- **Mobile Food Pantry:** This group is supported by scheduled volunteers following a careful social distance protocol outdoors.
- **Instrumental musical groups:** On a case by case basis, bell choirs - and other instrumental groups that are less than 10 - can gather in the church by appointment and schedule.
- **Volunteer Ministry:** Opportunities for virtual volunteering are being developed, as is a protocol for the number of volunteers who might be on site at a given time, should there be opportunity and a programmatic need for such.

Outside groups: Building access will be limited to First Pres programs and staff only. While a number of outside groups typically use our facilities when the campus is open, we do not have oversight or control of their participants’ behavior and activity and thus would be challenged to ensure safety compliance. Possible exceptions for the scouting troop we charter will be made on a case by case basis. PADS is addressing needs off campus presently and we are monitoring need and possibility as time goes forward.

Building access: For the sake of safety measures, including contact tracing, it is necessary to know who is in the building and why. That, combined with the necessity for increased sanitation when the building is used and for physical distancing, means that—

The building will remain locked, with access limited to the Douglas Avenue Church Office entrance. Entry will be appointment specific and coordinated by church employees and/or volunteers.

- **Use of space will be limited to staff-organized activities** as outlined above and with limited room availability and head-count capacity.
- **Preregistration will be required for any non-staff person on site.** This registration will be coordinated by the staff contact associated with the reason for being on site.
- **Restrooms will be available only to staff and to those persons preregistered to be in the building.**

Staffing: Employees who are able to do their work remotely will be encouraged to continue doing so with the oversight of their supervisors. For those staff whose work benefits from being on site, we have been rolling out employee access to the building, with safety measures in place. These include Plexiglas screens between work areas, required wearing of face masks, 6' distancing, and continuous sanitizing of office spaces.

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All of these decisions emerge from our affirmation of the biblical truth that **we are the body of Christ** and when one part of the body suffers, the whole body suffers alongside it.

They also affirm our trust that God's Spirit is not limited to what happens within the physical structures of a church building. In these recent months of being physically separated from one another we have seen afresh the countless expressions of God's presence in this community of faith.

We celebrate and give thanks for these many ways in which our virtual ministry and mission is thriving, the ways it is connecting individuals, and the ways it is touching people across Lake County, and the world. Witnessing that gives us confidence that while our decisions **change some of the ways in which we are church, they do not keep us from being church**. While the decisions change the way our life together looks now compared to a year ago, they do not limit our ability to live fully as disciples of Christ or to share the love of God; they simply invite us to explore new ways to do so.

Together we will remain unwavering in our commitment to be a faithful community, caring for one another and the world, welcoming all to worship, lifting up one another in prayer and fellowship, reaching out to one another, supporting mission and outreach, and living out our call to love and serve.