

Dear Members and Friends of Atonement,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

As promised, I'm writing to update you on the decision **to reopen Atonement's facilities to gatherings for worship**. This decision has been made in consultation with our congregation's leadership and is based on two larger reopening plans. The first and stricter of the larger plans is the creation of the Ecumenical Consultation on Protocols for Worship, Fellowship, and Sacraments, in which the ELCA participated. This plan is entitled *Resuming Care-filled Worship and Sacramental Life During a Pandemic*, and it is available [here](#). The second plan is the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's three-phase, color-coded reopening plan, with which most of us are very familiar by this time.

Informed by these two plans, our leadership has decided **to wait at least two full weeks after** Berks County transitions to the green phase before *scheduling* an opportunity for in-person, large-scale worship. This delay will allow us to confirm that the number of new cases in our area continues to decline despite the lifting of the yellow phase's aggressive mitigation orders. Let me remind you to manage your expectations of what church-in-the-green-phase will look like. The green phase will not feel like "back to normal"—that likely won't happen until a vaccine is widely available. We will continue to observe physical distancing protocols and to caution those who are especially vulnerable to the virus.

At least initially, our in-person, large-scale worship may not be *indoor* worship. One idea our leaders have been kicking around is to host **a drive-in worship service** in our expanded parking lot that may include the celebration of Holy Communion. Another idea is to invite you to bring your camping chairs or blankets and gather **on the church's lawn** for a time of worship at sunset. When we do finally decide to worship in the building, we may start by hosting a **Communion open house**, during which time you would be invited to come into the nave to receive the sacrament. In addition to these experiments, we will continue to offer online opportunities for worship and small groups.

This decision will also have an impact on the ministry of space we offer through **the Community Center**. The very earliest we will schedule the reopening of the Community Center will also be at least two full weeks *after* Berks County enters the green phase. The logistics of monitoring the number of people in the building and cleaning it between gatherings are complicated enough that reopening that facility at this time is not feasible. When we do reopen that facility, we may have to do so gradually and based on the availability of our sextons. I am so sorry for this delay because I know our Community Center plays an important role in the life of our members and friends in recovery.

In accordance with the Ecumenical Consultation's plan, we will continue to **limit in-person visits** to homes, hospitals, and other facilities. The Consultation's plan does allow us to make exceptions for the commendation of the dying if we observe physical distancing protocols during a brief visit. The plan also allows us to visit folks at their homes if we remain outdoors. So for now, we will continue to conduct most of our pastoral care ministry by telephone and other electronic means. If a phone call or e-mail just won't do, then it may be possible to schedule a brief visit with us on your porch or patio! We will continue to rely on you to reach out to us when a pastoral care need arises for you or your loved ones.

With regard to **the sacrament of Communion**, the bishop of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, Rev. Samuel Zeiser, has reiterated his guidance that we refrain from practicing what some have called virtual Communion. We may begin to celebrate Holy Communion in our pre-recorded Sunday service and invite those who are viewing the service to pray a prayer of spiritual Communion in anticipation of receiving the sacrament at our campus in the near future. We may also try hosting a Lutheran version of the Moravian Love Feast by Zoom, using the blessing and consumption of bread and cup to embody our holy yearning to experience the wholeness of Christian community.

I have no doubt that the process of reopening our facilities and expanding our ministry during this phase of the pandemic will be a frustrating one for many of us for a variety of reasons. Some of us may wish that our congregation would take a more laissez faire approach to reopening, while others may feel that any reopening of our facilities is totally irresponsible until a vaccine is widely available. As you experience your frustration with this process, please remember that our congregation's leaders and I are doing our best to navigate these uncharted waters in a way that honors the spirit and name of our Lord Jesus. And please, in the midst of your frustration, pray for us!

Thank you, my friends, for your partnership in this ministry!

Ryan+