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Monday, July 13, 2020

Dear Friends and Colleagues in Ministry,

A little more than two months ago, I wrote to offer what I had hoped were some pastoral considerations for a return to on-site gatherings and worship in the midst of the pandemic. In the interim, many of you have faithfully engaged in the hard work of discerning, discussing, communicating, and safely beginning a return to on-site worship, service, and ministries. And that work has been hard. I recognize that navigating differing perceptions of risk, varying personal preferences—not to mention what often feels like confusing, contradictory, or ever-changing guidelines from the experts—has placed (and continues to place) enormous pressure on you, your ministry, and your leaders. Everything that I have heard, however, continues to demonstrate to me that you all are leading well in a challenging time.

It seems to me, however, that we are entering into an increasingly tenuous phase of our experience with COVID-19. As things have begun to “open up” (including some of our churches), the number of cases and hospitalizations have increased in many areas and calls for a pause of re-opening or even a return to some form of shut-down are growing louder and more frequent. While I had personally hoped a mere month ago that we might soon be over the worst of the virus and can begin to start looking ahead, the current reality is much less hopeful and more discouraging.

With that in mind, and because larger, indoor gatherings such as worship and other church programming are especially risky, I write to offer, yet again, what I hope are some pastoral considerations for these next few weeks. These are not mandates, but prayerful suggestions or encouragements that will hopefully apply to any and all circumstances in the vast and diverse mission field that is all of New Mexico, the best parts of Texas, and portions of Arizona and Utah.

First, as clergy and lay leaders in your communities, keep vigilant and communicate thoroughly (with each other and with your congregations) about the very real risk and danger of COVID-19 as well as the best practices to avoid the spread of the virus. These best practices are simple: limit non-essential travel, wear a face mask in public, practice good hygiene and sanitation, maintain physical distancing, and monitor for symptoms and possible exposure to the virus. Follow, as best you can, all federal, state, and local guidelines that apply to your context.

Secondly, if you have returned to on-site worship and other gatherings, *do not grow lax in keeping up these best practices*. Further, as difficult or disheartening as it may be, refraining from congregational and choral singing when we gather is also a best practice. Monitor very, very closely any exposure possibility in your congregation as well as any spike in cases in your community. Any exposure or significant increase in cases in your community should be addressed swiftly and cessation or suspension of all on-site activity should be initiated and communicated well.

Third, if you have not yet returned to on-site worship and ministries, you should likewise continue to monitor local situations and government orders and regulations, deferring or delaying re-opening as needed. As has been the case all along, my strongest suggestion is that these conversations should be had with your leadership in your local context. Different communities of different individuals and demographic groups with vastly different

preferences will have different perceptions of what constitutes acceptable risk—and that is where we are with this virus: determining how much risk for exposure, illness, and possibly even death we are willing to take on in order to gather together in our buildings for worship and ministry. We should engage these conversations soberly and prayerfully, with as much grace for each other as possible.

Finally, if you have instituted online, drive-in, drive-thru or other forms of gathering for worship and community, I strongly encourage you to maintain those practices and, as much as you are able, enhance and improve upon them. Everything that I'm hearing is that our experience of this pandemic is likely to continue for some time, and we should continue to provide multiple and varied formats of virtual gathering insofar as we can. I acknowledge how exhausting these last few months have been, as everyone has scrambled to adjust to this new reality. Take care of yourself, extend grace to yourself and practice sabbath-keeping. At the same time, as far as you and your leaders are able, continue to be open to new ideas for worship, gathering, and service.

Although this strange season has been challenging for all of us, I recognize the special burden it has placed on the leadership in our local churches. None of this has been easy and as far as I know, none of us signed up for this or were in any way prepared for this in our vocational training, spiritual formation, or past experiences. It is hard and it seems as if it will be hard for a while for all of us. Please know that I hold you in my prayers, that I am ever grateful to work alongside you, and that I am truly humbled by how you have navigated these uncertain waters. I also will offer, as I have all along, to take your phone calls, emails, or text messages if you need further assistance from me or simply the opportunity to "think out loud" with me.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Randall W. Partin', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Randall W. Partin