

May 1, 2020

Dear Classis Georgetown Congregations:

We share this letter to encourage you, equip you, and empower you in this strange time.

The Covid-19 crisis and its implications are something that none of us has ever imagined. Congregations, pastors, and other church leaders are discovering and practicing strengths we did not know we had. Even the most naïve among us has had to learn how to embrace technology that is new to us even if is natural to our kids and grandkids.

The response to the isolation has uncovered gifts in us and in our congregations of resilience, flexibility, adaptability, empathy, patience, risk-taking, and initiative. It has also uncovered new ways of being and thinking about church, community, and team. These places of learning and growing have not been easy for any of us. The quarantine has been difficult, challenging, and sometimes costly.

### **From restrictions to precautions**

We believe however, that the next phase will hold a different kind of challenge as we move from a phase of *restrictions* to *precautions*. The most recent science and health advisories suggest several dynamics surrounding Covid-19:

- Covid-19 is not going away once society begins to reopen or re-engage
- Covid-19 is most contagious two days before a carrier is showing signs of any symptoms
- Having had Covid-19 does not ensure that someone is immune from future infection
- Human beings should be practicing social distancing until there is either more widespread testing or a vaccine

### **Looking beyond “opening day”**

Most of our congregations probably can't wait until we gather together again and regard the lifting of the restrictions as a finish line. We suspect however, that church leaders need to be looking beyond that day and imagining what gatherings will involve.

While the increased production of tests and the trials with vaccines are both underway, it is likely going to be sometime before either are readily available. This means that church communities will likely need to *innovate* and *rethink* how we do worship and ministry this summer, fall, and likely into 2021. We want to encourage you – if you haven't already – to begin thinking about how your life in community might look and, what precautions you might want to begin taking until testing or a vaccine is more readily available.

This may mean that once you “open your doors”, that you provide recommendations to your congregation. Those recommendations are likely going to need to be more than “no handshaking”. This may include encouraging some folks to stay home for a few weeks or

months; in some cases, it may mean *telling others* that they should not come; either for their sake or someone else's. Even when stay at home quarantines are lifted, we know that vulnerable members of our churches should still remain home.

We suspect that concerts, athletics, and community gatherings are going to be some of the last things to open. In light of this, we believe that you should prepare for your fall ministries to look very different. In the fall, it may mean a different look to ministries of education, a suspension of nursery, or a postponement of community meals. We don't believe it is too early to begin to talk about the impact Covid-19 *will have* on your ministries. Just as 9/11 changed the way we think about what is required to board an airplane, train, or enter a concert, we suspect in the short term, that churches (like schools) will need to rethink now how we gather our people and deliver our message.

### **The new normal may look very different from the old normal**

We suspect that this will change the way many of our congregations do the traditions, customs, and practices that we cherish: worship, sacraments, education, meals together, and fellowship. We believe it is not too soon to begin thinking about *provisional strategies* to address these things for the next six months or more.

In the meantime, we want to encourage our Classis congregations to persevere and lean on each other's wisdom as we try to find our way through this time. We also want to encourage our Classis congregations to abide by the guidelines being given by health officials. This is a public health issue and not just a political or economic one. Some of the leaders in our Classis churches are finding a need to make statements or policies overtly stating "we will abide by health department recommendations."

Our hope is that our Classis can continue to speak with one heart, one voice, and one witness in our *practices*. We want to encourage you to continue to observe the quarantine as long as it is in place. Second, we want to encourage you to use quarantine time as an opportunity for planning and anticipating what your congregation will likely need to do in anticipation of a longer season of precautions.

The good news is that these circumstances have already opened new resources in congregations we did not know we had (resilience, flexibility, adaptability, empathy, patience, risk-taking, technological learning and initiative). What feels challenging is that we are likely going to need to bring these resources to bear in new ways. Soon, we will likely have communal gatherings but will need to do so carefully and mindfully until there is more testing or a vaccine.

We pledge to remain in communication with you, want to support you, encourage you, and want to thank you for being part of Classis. More than ever, we need each other and the One who holds us and all things together (Eph 1:22).

The Vision Team

## **A sampling of potential reentry issues and themes - moving from restrictions to precautions**

*Church communities seem to be focused on “when can we gather again?” We don’t believe that is the true “finish line” and that we need to be looking at life after we begin gathering again.*

- 1. What if permissible or advisable crowd size is smaller than one’s congregation? Does a church wait until all can be included or do you worship in smaller clusters of people? What does gathering in multiple clusters mean for those who lead or facilitate worship encounters who are now exposed to *all of the clusters*?**
- 2. What guidelines and encouragements should be offered in terms of people who are discouraged from coming to worship (both for their health because they are fragile or someone else’s because they have symptoms or known exposure)?**
- 3. What existing and new communication touch points need to be reinforced or developed as the congregation learns to relate to the quarantine status?**
- 4. How does a church handle welcome and greeting - and welcome and greeting space? What guidance is given to people so that they can greet safely?**
- 5. What are the disinfectant/hygiene strategies for when people are together? Does the church provide increased disinfectant in gathering places or pews? Does a church develop a church safety team devoted to social hygiene? Are there people deputized to either ask someone to leave (for health reasons) or are there criteria developed to *measure* health? (If you are coughing, sneezing, or have a temp, does someone ask you to leave?)**
- 6. At what point is it safe and advisable to have a nursery / childcare center again?**
- 7. What disinfecting procedures are changed or amplified in between worship events or program days?**
- 8. How are the hands on aspects of worship handled? Sacraments of baptism and communion, offerings w/o passed plates, “friendship registers”, sign ups, meal sign ups, etc.**
- 9. What protections or procedures need to be discussed for those who handle money; transporting it and counting it?**
- 10. What is the impact of social hygiene sensitivities on weddings and funerals?**

- 11. Does the church continue hosting rentals and if so, what changes should be made in terms of cleaning, rental agreements, terms and conditions, etc?**
- 12. What is the impact on “coffee fellowship” and serving food on Sundays or Wednesdays?**
- 13. What is the impact on small group ministry, team meetings, and important but non-essential meetings of people?**
- 14. Does you intentionally reduce the size and scope of your leadership and office-bearers?**
- 15. Do you reduce the size of your staff?**
- 16. How do you ensure connection for those who are not connected relationally?**
- 17. How do you ensure connection for those who are not connected electronically? Does church offer a ministry of connecting people electronically or strategically provide IT help?**
- 18. Does church provide online curriculum or classes for Sunday School, High School Youth, adult ed, Bible study?**
- 19. For how long is the church campus a outreach ministry and “worship only” space?**
- 20. How to respond to post-corona issues; marriage and family tensions and dynamics including but not limited to abuse and addiction?**
- 21. How to respond to economic disparity and difficulty in a post-quarantine church.**

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Here is a link to a valuable resource that has been shared with the Vision Team by one of our Classis Churches.

It outlines a reentry plan in phases:

[https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/?fbclid=IwAR3Przf4c2au28T8-1J3VXZzlhspahRhfc-taiWuJ3SCaf7u3\\_s3k6q3i4w](https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/?fbclid=IwAR3Przf4c2au28T8-1J3VXZzlhspahRhfc-taiWuJ3SCaf7u3_s3k6q3i4w)