

Pandemic Updates and Church Decision Making 11/16/2020

Friends,

Along with most of you, I have continued to follow the news of increasing numbers of cases and hospitalizations of the COVID-19 virus in our region of the country. In all parts of the Presbytery, there are notable increases in numbers of cases and hospitalizations, but also in the positivity rates (percentage of positive tests of the whole). Unfortunately, even with better treatments available, potential fatalities from this virus could also begin to rise as a lagging indicator of both diagnosis and hospitalization.

While we are not alone in the impact of this pandemic affecting the entire country, we can be responsible for those actions that we can take both as individuals and as decision-making bodies on behalf of our congregations. It is imperative that we reinforce behaviors that protect others, both those who are vulnerable and those who “think” they are invincible. This can be the case with plans not only for our own upcoming family gatherings, but in the way we choose to gather as church families.

Consequently, I urge you to stay vigilant not only in your past safety practices, but in consideration of revisiting some of our activities and ministries. From the beginning, our efforts have reflected a prudential approach to “manage risk” on behalf of the whole of our congregations. With increased numbers of cases in our communities (and maybe in our congregations), the “management” of those risks may call now for some different choices (whether in person or virtual) concerning our worship gatherings, our various ministry activities and our office/administrative settings.

At the very least, we should be prepared to offer alternatives in the case of know exposures or positive cases among our congregants. Additionally, we may need to reconsider indoor gatherings of any size for any length of time as the result of increased community spread among our populations, increasing the likelihood of some of our participants being unknowing potential communicators of the virus. This could be the case not only for the immediate situation, but in anticipation of Advent and Christmas programs. While there are no guarantees in any of the actions that we might take, it is our responsibility to consider the risks and make choices to minimize the probability of further spread or harm.

Please consult and check the dashboard provided by the PA Department of Health (<https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/coronavirus/Pages/Cases.aspx>), where you can track by county or zip code. Additionally, I might also suggest the use of the tool put together by Georgia Tech as a “COVID-19 Event Risk Assessment Planning Tool.” It uses variables such as current number of cases, group size and testing availability in order to evaluate the risk assessment level of participating in an event in that location.

As always, I am available to consult with you as you seek to serve the Lord our God and your people faithfully during this ongoing season. As we seek to faithfully plan and prepare, we do so mindful that our God is Lord of heaven and earth. In our actions together, we testify to a grace that leads us beyond any and all fears yet challenges us to embody and signify God's kingdom even in periods of "exile" through alternative expressions.

Blessings,

Rev. Richard "Skip" Noftzger
Executive Presbyter/Stated Clerk
Presbytery of Redstone