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## Early Reopening of In-Person Worship Services

Adopted by the Executive Presbytery  
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Last week the Executive Officers sent a video to the churches of our district. That video expressed our stance and stated concerns surrounding the timeline and practices of resuming in-person worship at our church facilities. That video prompted many to contact us with questions or requests for clarification. Many pastors and churches that have contacted us are trying to reconcile our counsel with an unofficial movement that is pushing to reopen church facilities “without permission.” We felt the need to follow up with a more specific statement.

We understand the angst and frustration that most are feeling as a result of not being allowed to have in-person worship services. We are faced with unique and considerable challenges and are being deprived of one of the primary ways that we are designed (as humans) to navigate those challenges—corporate worship, prayer, and fellowship. We understand the desire and drive to re-engage our congregation and resume face-to-face meetings. However, there are known physical dangers and a variety of consequences to a premature decision in this matter, and we urge caution. Particularly when such meetings are prohibited by state guidelines, unless the local county has amended those guidelines.

Some have expressed concern that restricting public worship is a restraint of our constitution right to the free exercise of religion. The tension between these liberties and the federal and state emergencies presented by COVID 19 presents a legal question that will be debated by constitutional scholars for years to come. Nevertheless, the church is not singled out in these restrictions. Every American has, without due process, had their rights restricted—the right to assemble, the right to work, the right to walk in public spaces (and more) have been restricted. And much of the public are suffering greatly because of it. It is not appropriate for the church to complain about the loss of rights, while the larger public is suffering similar losses. Our mission as a church is to disciple nations. And, right now, the nation is suffering. We need to express compassion for our communities.

We know that the durability of the church is not dependent on a constitutional right but is promised by Jesus himself, "The gates of hell will not prevail against the church." We are absolutely certain that the church will survive this crisis. However, that cannot be said about the larger community, it has no such promise. Our community is severely threatened, and we don't know which will be more damaging: the sickness or the cure. Either way, our society is facing tragedy and hardship in the future. We've already seen where this is headed: poverty, isolation, and suicide are already on the rise. Crime, domestic abuse, and physical and mental illness will soon follow.

We want to remind ourselves that God has appointed us to serve him in this season and circumstance. We have a message of hope that people need to hear. We must not, however, speak hope with an angry tone. The public needs to know that we are more concerned about them and their needs than we are our own.

It's also important to make wise and defensible decisions. We know that our enemy would like to damage the church, and he has his agents that are working hard to make that happen. The media, the public, and the courts are laying snares and traps and we need to avoid walking into them. These are dangerous days and we need to act wisely.

Consequently, our district affiliated churches have been instructed to follow the guidelines that apply in their jurisdiction. We urge our DA churches to continue to find alternative ways to minister to people, in ways that do not violate these guidelines. They have willingly agreed to do so.

General Council churches are empowered to make their own decisions, and, of course, shoulder the consequences. Nevertheless, we hope that the Pastor and Board will discuss the issues thoroughly and make a prudent decision.