

November 18, 2020

Church Family & Friends,

With the rising COVID hospitalizations and recent MDHHS orders, the elders have had more questions regarding what's coming up for Ventura's gatherings. Are we going to require masks now? Are we going to cancel anything? Does any of this apply to us?

The elders prayed and discussed plans moving forward, and I personally was very encouraged by the conversation because while we as individual elders would apply things differently in our personal lives, there is absolute agreement on what we believe to be the best plan moving forward. The reason there's unanimity amongst the elders is because our greatest concern is to maintain the gospel as central and, as a result, to seek what is best to maintain unity with the believers we've covenanted with.

The last several months have been the most stressful months to pastor because I've seen a real divide not only in people's viewpoints, but in how we articulate our viewpoints. In our church family, we have people who believe social distancing and masks are vital. We also have church members who believe that we should go back to normal. The beliefs of all are genuinely held, and the concern of the elders is that these beliefs don't eclipse Jesus and the gospel. So, what do we do?

In looking in Romans 14-15 and 1 Corinthians 8-9, we find Paul's pastoral counsel when we face issues like this. The issue isn't to wear a mask or not wear a mask. The question is, "When Christians who have committed to each other's godliness disagree on secondary matters, how do we address our liberty and practice with each other?" The answer Paul gives is that we voluntarily release our rights for the good of my brothers and sisters in Christ. As Paul says in Romans 15:1, we seek not to please ourselves but to bear with one another. As a result, even though Paul said that he was free to eat meat, he would never eat again if it caused another believer to think they were less accepted with the Lord.

Paul's passion is clear because Jesus' passion is the unity of the church. His body was broken so that the church would be whole. Therefore, may we never divide the body. May we seek to build it up.

Right now you could be thinking, "Oh boy, here it comes. He's going to call me to sacrifice." Well, yes. But what we want to emphasize to our church family is that we believe *everyone* in our church is to sacrifice. People in our church family may urge us to close the doors for testimony's sake. People in our church family may urge us to keep the doors open. We can be urged to wear a mask or not wear a mask. Sacrifice calls all of us to consider how to serve the others around us.

So, saying all of this, the elders affirm that the proposed course is the best course for our personal church family. We hope this decision leads you to the throne of grace and causes you to seek to show love to our church family – both with those who agree and with those who disagree with you – revealing that our unity in Christ is more precious than anything else.

We do want to say that our decisions at this point in time are only decisions that we foresee to be in place until the end of December. So, there are a few discipleship opportunities that we can quickly talk about:

Office Hours. The office staff will be working, but do not expect the doors to be unlocked. If you need to get into the church, please contact Pastor Timothy and he can give you the lockbox keycode if no one is in the church at the time you need to enter.

Discipleship Groups. We are continuing discipleship groups and are leaving it up to each group leader to decide how they're going to handle their groups. Some groups may be via Zoom. Others may be within the church's building.

Children & Youth Discipleship. For safety and volunteer concerns, we have decided to cancel all children's and youth discipleship for the month of December. This includes *Sprouts* and Nursery.

We can now talk about the Sunday morning gathering. There are a couple principles that we want you to know first:

1. We believe in the importance of believers being able to gather if they can. And, as a congregational church, many in our church *desire* to gather together regularly.
2. We believe in the importance of as many church members as can gather should be welcomed to do so.

So, saying this, we are not closing the doors. We will continue to maintain the 9:30 and 11:15 services, with distancing. We will offer the Live Stream for those who are unable or uncomfortable with gathering at this point in time.

Now, we move to the next point. How do we ensure as many as can gather are welcomed to do so? Over the last couple of weeks, more members have expressed concern about the gathering – even whether they will gather given their health concerns and/or whether masks will be required. In an effort to maintain and reveal our unity, the only change we're adding is that we are requiring masks. So, in essence, if you can wear a mask, please wear a mask. I know this may tempt some people to say that they won't come to gather if this is a requirement, but please reconsider the privilege of sacrificing for other brothers and sisters in Christ. This is a perfect opportunity to show longsuffering and endurance. Things you would miss if you didn't gather. And, for those who may be disappointed that we aren't doing more, please consider the nature of our church family and the genuine desire of fellow Christians for whom Christ died. They want to encourage each other in their faith in Christ.

Again, we are only making these plans through the end of December. More discussion will take place as we approach 2021, and we pray that our practice as a church family exercises and reveals our trust in the Lord who is building his church even in tense and difficult seasons like 2020.