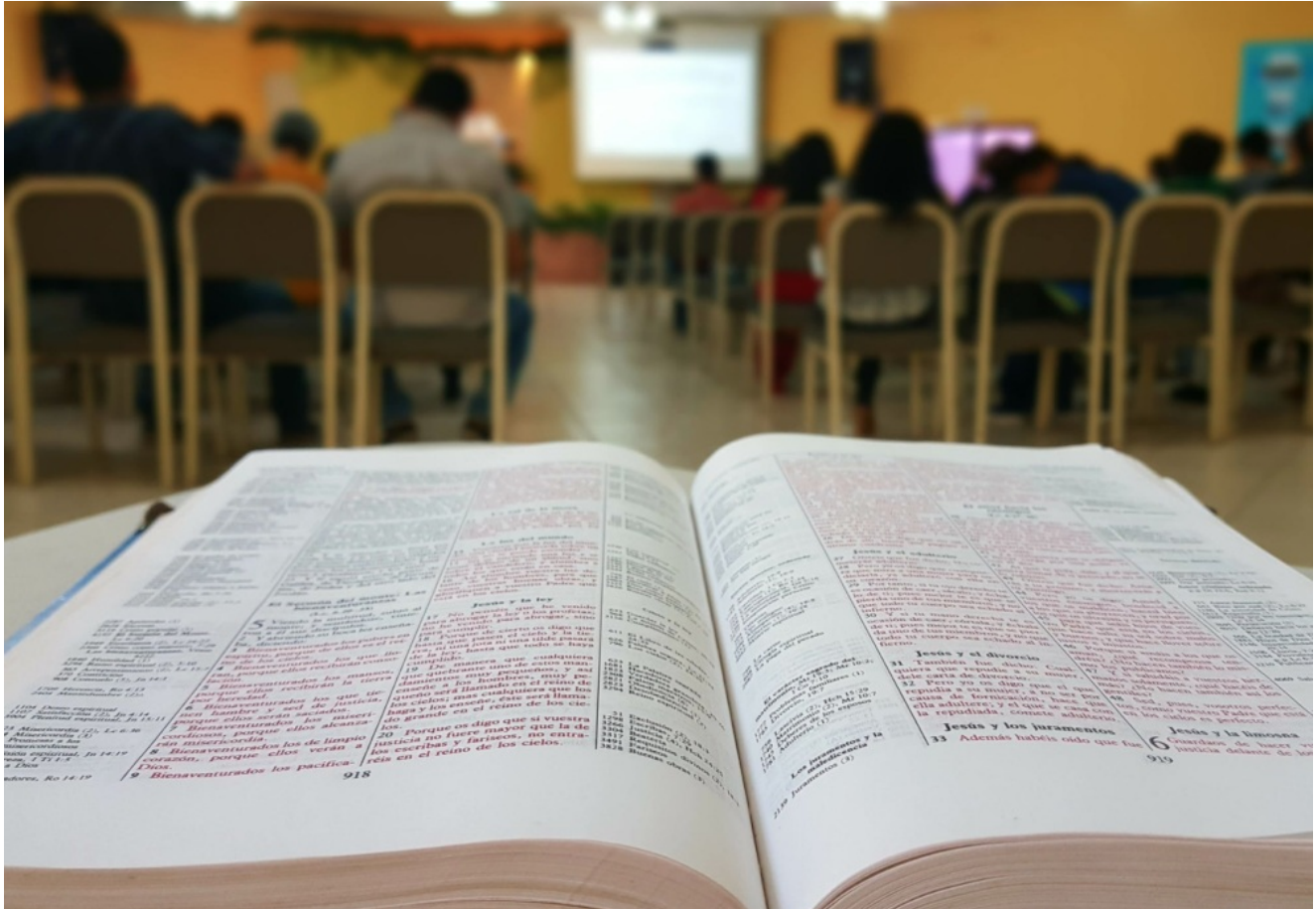


Why Our Church Decided To Revive In-Person Worship

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I am a pastor at a small Lutheran congregation in southeast Michigan, and like many other congregations, my church decided in March to temporarily pause in-person services on account of the coronavirus pandemic, instead posting videos of our services online. At the time, we had to respond quickly to unprecedented circumstances, so we did our best to act in line with Christian principles, even if we could not perfectly communicate exactly why we felt our decisions were appropriate.

Now we've had time to reflect and gain clarity. While we still believe we made the right decisions to temporarily pause in-person services, I now believe it's time for us to start back up. We paused services for one reason: to do our part to slow the initial spread of virus, so our health care system wouldn't be overwhelmed. It seems that reason has expired.

Christians Are Commanded to Worship Corporately

We Christians have a command from God to gather for corporate worship. As the writer to the Hebrews [says](#), "Let us consider how to stir one another up to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near"

(Hebrews 10:24-25). There, in the gathered assembly, our Lord Jesus stands before us and graciously ministers to us, cleansing us by his blood, giving us new life in his resurrection, and strengthening us in the face of every temptation.

As Jesus himself affirms, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them” (Matthew 18:20). Therefore, for us Christians, corporate worship is not optional. It is an essential part of our life of faith, and our God commands we engage in it.

It’s worth noting that God commands us to do this even amid external dangers. Think about how the church has historically responded in times of persecution. Rather than stopping corporate worship for the sake of bodily safety, persecuted Christians — while taking appropriate precautions — have still continued to worship together, standing boldly on Jesus’ promise: “Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 16:25).

For example, in the time of the apostles, when Christians faced severe persecution, they still continued to gather, but they did so behind locked doors as during Peter’s imprisonment (Acts 12:12-13). So it should be for the church, no matter the external danger, whether persecution or plague. God wants his church to gather for worship, even as we take precautions. In fact, it’s at such dangerous times that we most need the church.

Churches Paused to Fulfill a Life-Protecting Duty

We also have a command from God to protect the lives of our neighbors. The commandment “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13) includes not only refraining from killing other human beings unjustly, but also actively protecting them. Therefore, we Christians ought to be concerned about the bodily health and safety of our community, doing all we can to promote and protect it.

Sometimes, in particularly dire circumstances, fulfilling this commandment might even require temporarily setting aside other obligations. For instance, when the Good Samaritan saw the injured man lying on the side of the road, he paused his journey and offered help before continuing (Luke 10:29-35). In the same way, if our neighbors are in immediate danger, sometimes we must temporarily set aside our other duties to help.

That thought led us to pause in-person services at my church. We understood that unless we took those drastic measures, our health care system could be overwhelmed, resulting in an exceptionally large number of deaths. In other words, our decision was simply about fulfilling our duty to our community under unique circumstances for this specific goal. We didn’t stop services out of fear for our safety, nor as a long-standing measure. Our choice was about sacrificing something important for the sake of others.

Now that we are past the peak of infections in our area, and our health-care system is not in immediate danger of being overwhelmed, it’s time for us to resume in-person services in a responsible way.

It’s Time for Reasonable Reopenings

Our church plans to start by holding multiple small services on Sundays, taking extraordinary precautions to minimize the chance of person-to-person spread. We also plan to continue posting videos of our services online for those who are not yet comfortable attending, and will be making private pastoral visits

available for high-risk people. Once it is safe for us to do so, we hope to ease restrictions gradually until we can at last gather freely as we did before.

Some might argue that our duty to our community requires that we pause in-person services for a much longer time, at least until we have largely contained the virus. After all, won't these worship gatherings risk further spread? We must keep in mind two important things.

First, as I said above, the church's typical response to external dangers is not to stop public worship entirely, but to adjust public worship by taking appropriate precautions. Certainly, if our community's medical capacity is seriously threatened or if we experience a significant flare-up, it might be right for us again to pause in-person services to address those specific threats. But outside such exceptional circumstances, our God commands us to gather, even amid danger.

Second, every state lockdown has still allowed people to participate in "essential" activities, such as grocery shopping or receiving important medical treatment. We're allowed to do these things because they're considered essential to our human life. Christians contend that corporate worship is infinitely more essential, for there God gives us eternal blessings in Christ Jesus. The past few weeks have made clear that online worship is no replacement for in-person services. Even though we still receive the Word through such services, we do not receive the Sacraement, and it just isn't the same.

For the sake of our spiritual lives, we need to worship with other believers, gathering in our church, standing before our pastor, and eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ. If going to the store so we can buy food that perishes is essential, then certainly so is going to church, where the Son of Man gives us "food that endures to eternal life" (John 6:27).

Therefore, given my congregation's circumstances, I believe it's time for us to begin reopening. Even more, I believe it's time for every congregation to consider its unique situation in light of God's Word and act accordingly, remembering that in Christ we have nothing to fear, that in him death has been defeated, and that "we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).