

Greetings in our Savior's Name,

It wasn't easy to decide to suspend our in-person worship opportunities here at Salem. The first couple of weeks of March were a whirlwind of new reports, changing recommendations, and increasingly strict guidance from the government. While the decision was not made lightly, it was made prayerfully and in line with God's Word. On March 18, in-person worship at Salem was suspended at the decision of a joint BCE, Church Council, and Board of Elders meeting. The decision was made with these scriptural principles in mind:

1. God commands us to do all we can to protect the life and health of our neighbor. (Ex 20:13; Lev 19:16; 1 Thess 5:14,15)
2. God commands us to obey governing authorities as his representatives. (Rm 13:1,2; 2 Pet 2:13,14)
3. God commands us to gladly and regularly hear his Word, and he calls us to share the gospel of Jesus with our community and the world. He also gives us freedom to use our discretion on how and when to worship/proclaim the Word. (Heb 10:24,25; Col 3:16; Mt 28:18-20; Col 2:13-17; Mt 11:28,29)

It is now time to begin planning how we will resume in-person worship. At the time of this letter, it has already been about two and a half months since we last filled the sanctuary and worshipped together in person. It probably feels a lot longer than that. While a lot has changed since then, the scriptural principles that led Salem's leadership to decide to suspend in-person worship have not changed.

We have been blessed to be able to continue worship in an online and radio fashion. We'll continue our radio broadcast and livestream services. These are blessings, but they are not perfect replacements for the fellowship and encouragement we receive in meeting together. Unfortunately, they are also not accessible for some of our members for various reasons. Finally, we are unable to enjoy the fullness of fellowship God intends for us in the Lord's Supper in private communion devotions. Returning to in-person worship as soon as reasonably and responsibly possible is important for Salem for fulfilling its mission statement, "to serve all people in God's world with the gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of the Holy Scriptures."

Paul wrote to the believers in Rome, *"Everyone must submit to the governing authorities. For no authority exists except by God, and the authorities that do exist have been established by God. Therefore the one who rebels against the authority is opposing God's institution, and those who oppose will bring judgment on themselves."* (Rm 13:1,2) These are strong words that remind Christians to think about God's will before they act. God has blessed us with a nation that promotes individual freedom, but he continues to expect us to be obedient Christian citizens who recognize that authority doesn't come from our consent, but from God himself. Applying this principle on a congregational level to the question of whether to open church for in-person worship or not is somewhat difficult. Governor Whitmer's most recent order, 2020-96 prohibits gatherings of more than 10 people who are not of the same

household. At the same time, section 16 of the order exempts churches and churchgoers from punishment or penalty for violating the order to go to worship:

“Consistent with prior guidance, neither a place of religious worship nor its owner is subject to penalty under section 22 of this order for allowing religious worship at such place. No individual is subject to penalty under section 22 of this order for engaging in or traveling to engage in religious worship at a place of religious worship, or for violating section 15(a) of this order.”

The government appears to have intentionally left a gray area in which churches may operate. As a congregation, we can give thanks to God for guiding our government to make this allowance. We have the freedom to take advantage of this opportunity to gather to worship in good conscience.

We must be clear that we would **not** be taking advantage of this opportunity allowed us in defiance of the government. There has been some praise for churches that “defy orders” in the news recently. As a congregation of believers who hold to God’s commands, we reject any hint of defiance or disobedience to the government. Such attitudes are sinful except in cases where the church must humbly defy or disobey the government when the government issues orders contrary to God’s Word. This is not such a situation because the government has not specifically targeted churches.

As a congregation we also recognize that the principle of obeying government applies to our members on an individual level. The current orders require that masks be worn and that social distancing be practiced. Many of the changes to our regular worship practices outlined below are in order that members of our congregation will be able to follow these requirements in a God-pleasing manner.

As the months of the pandemic drag on, many people are getting exhausted and fed up with all the precautions. Maybe you are too. Paul encouraged the church in Galatia, *“Let us not become weary of doing good, because at the appointed time we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who belong to the household of faith.”* (Gal 6:9,10) As we keep the principle of protecting the health and lives of our neighbors, we can renew our motivation and resolve in the love of Christ who loved us so much he died for us. Our love for one another and our respect for the gifts of health and life our Gracious Father gives to us lead us to take precautions, even if they are uncomfortable and tiring, as we return to in-person worship. (Precautions are especially important at church since worship services come inherently with a higher risk for transmission of disease for a number of reasons.) In doing so we show love for one another as well as for our community.

It is likely that some of the precautions listed below will seem overboard to some, or insufficient to others. The survey that came out with our last newsletter revealed a broad spectrum of opinions within our congregation. (What a beautiful thing it is that God brings people with such diverse thoughts and concerns into one unified body!) Some would probably have been comfortable to worship in person with no extra precautions all the way through March, April, and May. Others are concerned about a

possible second wave of the virus and wonder if it is premature to even be talking about resuming in-person worship. Please recognize that the devil will be working hard to use COVID-19 and our (often very emotional) responses to it to divide us and cause tension between brothers and sisters in faith. Instead of allowing anger and dissent or resentment and ridicule to reign in your heart, consider Paul's words to the Ephesians: *"Live with all humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another in love."* (Eph 4:2)

Finally, please continue to remember our congregation, community, state, nation and world in your prayers, along with the leaders of each. No precautions can protect us without God's blessing, and there are difficult decisions to be made at every level. Prayerfully consider your reactions and your plan for worship. No one will be a better Christian or more saved for coming the first time we are able to worship in-person, and no one will be less Christian or less saved for staying home because of health concerns. Fight your urge to judge others for having different responses than your own. Most of all, trust in our Glorious God to carry us through to the eternity Jesus won for us.

We are excited to see you soon!

Pastor Wilde & Pastor Bare

If you have any questions, concerns, or comments, please don't hesitate to contact the church office.

## Plan for Resuming In-Person Worship at Salem Evangelical Lutheran Church

*I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord."*  
Psalm 122:1

*Please read through and familiarize yourself with the following list of precautions so that you know what to expect when you return to in-person worship at Salem.*

### When

- We are tentatively planning to return to worship at church the weekend of June 21. This would include services both on **Sunday June 21 and Thursday, June 18**. This could change, depending on changing guidance from the government and health officials.
- In order to enable social distancing during worship, we will add two extra worship opportunities.

- Thursday we will hold services at 5:00 and 7:00PM
- Sunday we will hold services at 8:00, 10:30, and 2:00PM.

## Prior to Worship

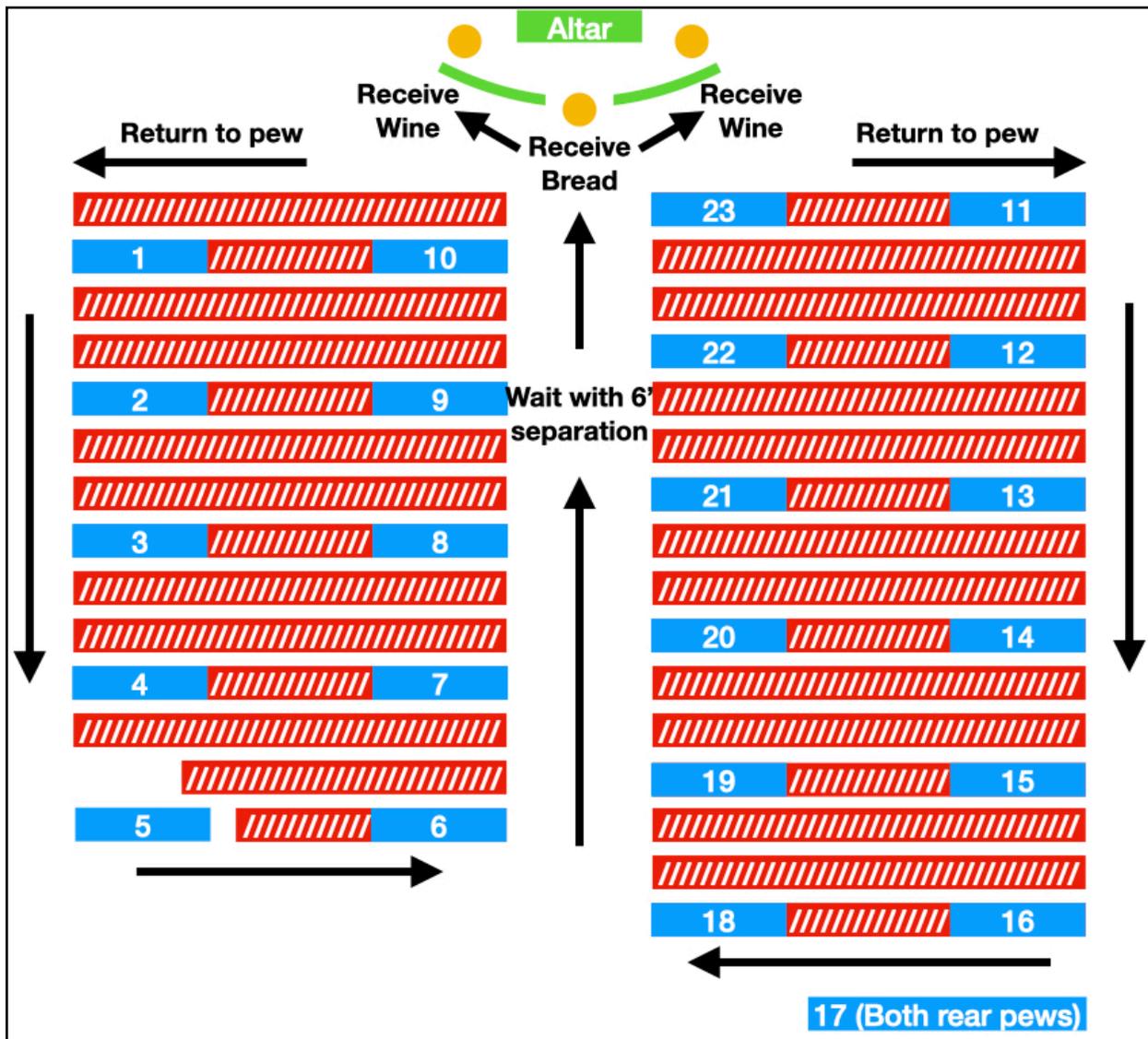
- With pews marked off for social distancing, we have 24 sections available for households. Each section is 5' long, with the exception of sections 5 and 17. (See the included continual flow communion diagram.)
- Section 5 is the wheelchair area near the elevator. Disinfected chairs will be available for family wishing to sit with household members in wheelchairs.
- Section 17 (the two pews in the very back of the south side of church) is larger and we ask that it be reserved for one large household.
- The balcony will count as one section, and we ask that it be reserved for one large household. Only the front two rows of pews should be used.
- **We ask that worshippers register for their chosen service** using the Signup Genius app or website on their phone or computer. Those who do not have internet access, or are uncomfortable using Signup Genius are asked to call the church office Monday through Friday between the hours of 8-4 to register.
- Doors will be propped open 15 minutes prior to worship, and closed after the first hymn so that members do not have to touch doors.
- Hand sanitizer will be available at the entrances of church.
- Church windows will be left open during worship to enable fresh airflow.
- Worshippers are asked to fill the sanctuary from the front to the back. (We understand this goes against your Lutheran instinct to sit in the back and thank you for your willingness to fight that urge!)
- Worshippers will record their attendance by section. (Section specific attendance cards will be provided.)
- There will be no greeters.

## During Worship

- We will use every third pew for seating, and only the ends of the pew. (Pews will be marked off to assist in distancing.) Households may sit together.
- Hymnals will not be available.
- Bulletins will include the entire liturgy as well as hymn lyrics and will not be reused. Please take your bulletin home and recycle it.
- We plan to project or use a screen for the worship service as well.
- Singing has been shown to carry a higher risk of disease transmission. It is also an important part of worship. We will aim for a balanced approach, limiting some singing during worship. (excluding some liturgical songs, singing shorter hymns, etc.)

## Holy Communion

- We are very excited to be able to commune together again! The fellowship of the Lord's Supper is one of the main reasons we want to be able to worship in person.
- For safety's sake, we will practice "continual flow communion. Communicants in section 1 will proceed down the side aisle to the back of the sanctuary and then proceed up the center aisle toward the altar. Tape arrows and lines will guide the flow and assist in maintaining social distancing while waiting for communion. The flow will continue with communicants from sections 2-10 on the north side of church.
- The south side of church will commune after the north side is finished, starting with section 11 and ending with section 23.
- The balcony household will commune last.
- (Note: Communicants in sections 10, 22, and 23 may not have to stand in the aisle before coming forward.)



- Communicants will come forward to the pastor at the center individually, or as households, pause to receive Christ's body in the bread, then move to the pastor on their side to pause to receive Christ's blood in the wine before returning to their seats.
- Communicants are asked to cup both hands to receive the bread. The pastor will drop the bread into their cupped hands without making physical contact.
- The wine will be placed on the communion rail for the communicant to take.
- For the time being, the common cup will not be offered.
- Gluten free bread and grape juice will continue to be available as usual. (Communicants desiring gluten free bread or grape juice may indicate so with a raised index finger.)
- The pastors and distribution assistants will exit the sanctuary during the *Sanctus* to wash their hands with soap and water prior to distribution.
- The pastors and distribution assistants will wear face masks during distribution.
- Hand sanitizer will be available in the aisle as communicants approach the altar.
- The pastors will continue to bring communion directly to those who prefer not to walk. (We understand that this is a longer walk than normal. Tell a deacon or usher that you wish to receive communion in your pew and they will alert the pastors before the end of distribution.)
- Communicants will receive the blessing at the end of distribution.

## After Worship

- Doors will be propped open following the final hymn until worshippers have exited.
- Worshippers will exit the church from back to front. Worshippers on the north side of church are asked to use the Williams Street (side) door. Worshippers on the south side of church are asked to use the Washington Street (front) door.
- The offering will be gathered at the doors. Online giving also remains an option.
- The sanctuary will be disinfected between all services. Pews will be wiped down with bleach water or disinfectant wipes. Doors and railings will be wiped down. The elevator will be wiped down. Bathrooms will be cleaned.
- Attendance will be recorded by section in case the information is necessary for future contact tracing. (We pray this will not be the case.)
- Pastors will not greet at the doors. Weather permitting, they will greet outdoors, following social distancing guidelines.
- If you need to speak to a pastor privately, please contact the church office.

## General Precautions

- It's a sobering fact that half of those who carry the coronavirus do not show any symptoms. Masks are shown to limit the spread of droplets. Singing in worship has also been shown to have a higher risk of transmission. The use of face masks is recommended by the CDC, the White House, and required by executive order in Michigan. For these reasons, **we strongly encourage members to wear face masks** to reduce the possible spread of germs in the air. It's really for the

protection of your brothers and sisters in faith around you. Worshippers should bring their own masks.

- Ushers will wear face masks when performing usher duties.
- Social distancing also continues to be recommended by the CDC, the White House, and required by executive order in Michigan. Many of the changes that we are making to our normal worship practices have the goal of enabling social distancing. We plan to continue making efforts to enable and practice social distancing as much as possible. **We ask that worshippers follow social distancing recommendations as much as possible.**
- For now, handshakes, hugs, high-fives, and other physical contact will not be practiced at church. Our fellowship is one of faith and heart, deeper than physical touch.
- We ask that social interaction before or after the service take place outside.
- If you are feeling ill at all, have a fever, have a cough, or have been exposed to someone who has the coronavirus or may be at risk, please stay home and watch our online services or listen to our radio service.
- Symptoms of COVID-19 include fever, chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting, or diarrhea. (This list does not include all possible symptoms.)
- Hand sanitizer will be available at the entrances of church, as well as in the aisle for communicants approaching the altar.
- If you become sick after worship, especially if you test positively for the coronavirus, contact the church office immediately.

## Live Stream/Radio Option

- For those who do not feel safe venturing out yet, or are at high risk, we intend to continue offering services live on our YouTube channel even after we return to worship. We will stream the 10:30 service every Sunday.
- When we return to in-person worship, we will continue broadcasting our radio services on Z92.5FM at 10:00 every Sunday.
- Your pastors are always willing to serve you with God's Word and Holy Communion privately. If you are not comfortable returning to in-person worship right away and desire a private communion devotion, please contact the church office to schedule one.