THOUGHTS ON BETHEL’S REOPENING

By now, you probably know that on Monday, the Governor announced a plan for the phased, gradual reopening of the Commonwealth. It was somewhat surprising to hear that churches were included in the first phase of the reopening, though we now know that legal and political considerations may have had a role in this. We’ve been talking about this at the staff and board levels for almost a month; we discussed it at the Church Conference more than a week ago. But now the hypothetical (the “maybe”) has become the real. The question is how Bethel will respond.

Let us say first that the church never closed and we never stopped meeting. That’s why we’re in no rush to reopen and we can take our time figuring out when and how we reopen the church buildings. Here’s what will guide our process:

- **PRAYER** – However much we think we know, this is a novel (new) Coronavirus and it continues to surprise us every day. We’re learning a lot and doing our best to apply what we know. Still, we don’t want to make any decisions without direction and guidance from the God who knows it all—beginning to end. We’re asking our prayer teams to really focus some time in every prayer meeting on asking God to give us wisdom in discerning when and how we reopen the buildings. We would ask you to do the same.

- **OUR CITY** – Boston is very much a part of MA, but also unique. Until recently it was the third hottest “hot spot” in the US (after New York City and northern New Jersey) for sickness and death from COVID. It’s the third densest city in the US (after New York City and San Francisco). Our infection rates are quite different from many parts of the Commonwealth. So we will be guided by what our Governor and Mayor, our state and city departments of health are saying.

- **OUR CHURCH** – What will it take to make Bethel a safe place to worship? How will we manage the numbers of people entering the church; their movement throughout the church; their movement into and out of the sanctuary, common areas, and bathrooms; and their exit after services? How do we manage air circulation or the cleaning of high-traffic areas between services? How do we deal with worship and preaching with masks on? How do we respond to people who may be emotionally distraught? What do the invitation and altar prayer look like? Childcare is not permitted, but what about child and youth worship services? How long will we need to practice our new procedures before we can even consider inviting elders and others at higher-risk from this virus to
rejoin us? As we regather for physical worship, how do we continue to minister to the many people we have connected with through our virtual ministry (including our own members)? These are just a few of the many, many questions that have to be answered and then implemented.

- **OUR FUTURE** – Of course, we’ll be following what happens in MA. We’re also looking at what’s happening in Georgia, Texas, and Florida, as well as Japan, Sweden, Spain, and many other countries. Early evidence is not encouraging, but it’s early. Are the 2 churches in Texas and Georgia which reopened and then had to close 2 weeks later because of COVID infections a fluke or a prophecy?

- **PRAYER** – Before and after we’ve gathered all this information and talked to all the experts we can, we’re going to be praying so that our decision reflects our faith, not our fears, and God’s will, not our worries.

Our staff, Stewards and Trustees are already working on these issues. We’ll be putting together a Reopening Task Force to pull together all this work and advise us on the many questions that need to be answered. Of course, Coronavirus is an unprecedented, once-in-a-century challenge. Thankfully, we serve a God who is from everlasting-to-everlasting and has seen it all. Together, we’re going to make it through this wilderness and come out stronger on the other side. God bless you.

Pastors Ray and Gloria White-Hammond, Co-Pastors
Bethel AME Church
40 Walk Hill St.
Boston, MA 02130

617-524-7900 (wk)
617-524-4169 (fax)
pastorray@bethelboston.org