

## **Should Pease CRC Resume Corporate Worship?**

*An open discussion around some of the issues related to answering that question*

*By: Pastor Michael Ten Haken*

On Saturday, May 22<sup>nd</sup>, Governor Walz issued Executive Order 20-62, “Amending Executive Order 20-56 to Allow Worship, Weddings, and Funerals to Proceed as Safely as Possible during the COVID-19 Peacetime Emergency”.

This executive order amends EO 20-56 to allow for corporate worship gatherings that are greater than 10 people. This amendment was reached as a result of a few prominent religious groups, in particular the Archdiocese of Minnesota and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, who publicly declared their intent to defy the governor’s order related to restrictions of corporate worship gatherings. Almost simultaneously, President Trump spoke on national television and said that corporate worship is essential, the churches should be “opened up”. He then proceeded to tell the CDC to issue guidance to ensure that could happen, and told states and their governors that if they didn’t comply with his request, they would have to answer to him. *(As an aside, the President has no authority to tell governors nor the CDC what it can and can’t do in this case, but he made it sound as though he could.)* In response to these developments there was a meeting with Governor Walz, an agreement was reached, and EO 20-62 was released.

The heart of the order is this:

1. Paragraph 6.c of Executive Order 20-56 is amended by adding the following subparagraph 6.c.v (indicated by underlined text):

v. Effective on May 26, 2020 at 11:59 pm, places of worship, funeral homes, and other venues that offer gathering space for weddings, funerals, or planned services such as worship, rituals, prayer meetings, or scripture studies, may host such weddings, funerals, or services with over 10 people, provided that they adhere to the below requirements:

A. In all settings, ensure a minimum of 6 feet of physical distancing between households.

B. In indoor settings, occupancy must not exceed 25 percent of the normal occupant capacity as determined by the fire marshal, with a maximum of 250 people in a single self-contained space.

C. In outdoor settings, gatherings must not exceed 250 individuals.

D. Develop and implement a COVID-19 Preparedness Plan in accordance with guidance developed by the Minnesota Department of Health, available at <https://mn.gov/deed/guidance>

2. All other provisions of Executive Order 20-56 remain in effect.

Since this order has been issued, many of you have heard about it on the news or elsewhere and are thinking, "Great! Now we can finally get back to church!" I am so grateful that so many of you have that desire. Corporate worship is such a critical part of expressing our faith. The physical gathering of the body is so important and we desire to do that again with you as soon we deem it safe to do so. Thank you for your patience and for enduring along with an imperfect system of gathering while we are apart!

The Administrative Team and Council are well aware of what is transpiring and is being very thoughtful, careful, and intentional about determining how best to proceed with the resumption of corporate worship gatherings. Below, I want to lay out some of that thought process in order to bring you along in it and inform you about our plans for the future corporate worship at Pease CRC.

### **1. What does EO 20-62 mean for Pease CRC?**

It means we are allowed, but not required, to gather for worship in an indoor group setting provided that we can meet the guidelines in both EO 20-62 and EO 20-56. Doing so is required by law and failure to comply is punishable by a fine or imprisonment. In our case, not following the guidelines laid out in the EO's means that the church could be fined and myself, as its leader, could be put in jail. Since that's the case, if and when we resume corporate worship we fully intend to comply with any and all restrictions from the state and we will expect any one else who attends to do the same.

### **2. What are those restrictions?**

The order stipulates that a gathering cannot exceed 25% of the capacity of its facility or 250 persons, whichever is fewer. In our case in Pease we worship between 250-300 persons on a typical Sunday morning (less in the summer). Our sanctuary has a fire code capacity of 600 persons. 25% of that is 150 ( $600/4 = 150$ ). This means that currently we are not allowed to have more than 150 persons in our church building at any one time.

### **3. What other mandatory requirements would we have to follow?**

In addition to limiting attendance to 150 or fewer, we would also need to create and implement, a written COVID-19 Preparedness Plan as outlined by the MN Dept of Health. The requirements for doing that are quite extensive and include things like cleaning and sanitation of all surfaces, mask-wearing protocols, maintaining social distance rules – especially during entry and exit through new established interior traffic patterns, and providing proper signage and information, just to name a few.

### **4. Even so, other churches are holding corporate services, when and how does Pease CRC plan to do so?**

First it must be said that while several churches have begun meeting, many more have not. The media tend to skew the numbers, but the fact is, most churches in Minnesota continue to suspend corporate worship. We had originally committed to a suspension of corporate worship through May 31<sup>st</sup> and that has not changed. As a church, we have many things to consider, as we determine if, when, and how to proceed. Here are a few:

#### *1. How do we go about limiting attendance to 150 persons or fewer?*

There are several ways to do this such as having shepherding groups take turns (maybe 3 groups one week and 3 the next), providing an online sign-up sheet, doing it alphabetically by last name (A-M one week, N-Z the next), or having two services and assigning people to one or the other (early or late) with a cleaning period in between. None of these options is without its drawbacks as they all answer some questions and create others.

#### *2. How will we adhere to social distancing requirements?*

One of the challenges of an event such as corporate worship that make it different than going to the hardware or grocery store is that everyone arrives and leaves in roughly the same time frame. Crowd control especially during entrance and exit is a real challenge. We would likely do what has now become common -- place markings on the ground at six-foot intervals and create directional ‘flow of traffic’ patterns that require use of certain aisles or doors for entry and exit.

In addition, we would need to ‘rope off’ at least every other bench and develop a system by which there would be at least six feet between households. This is not as easy as it sounds, some families are large and some are not. A family of 5 or 6 might take all the available space in one bench even if they sit close together whereas we could seat two or three single persons in the same bench and still maintain six feet of distance. At the very least, getting together would likely mean having to recruit and train ushers that would seat you according to strict rules. Members would most likely not be able to arrive and sit in their ‘usual spot’. Instead a variety of factors would have to be considered when determining where and how to seat people and families. It will not be the case that worshippers could enter the sanctuary and just ‘take a seat’.

### *3. What other things are you considering enforcing?*

There are several other things we must consider that make gathering for corporate worship a challenge right now:

1. Physical contact – We would not allow any hand-shaking, hugging, or fellowship time after the service. The greeting time during the service would also remain suspended.
2. Child Care – Nursery, Children’s Worship, and Little Lambs would most likely not be open.
3. Mask-wearing – Guidelines mandate that we encourage (but not require) masks. However, we could require them if we so choose.
4. Singing -- There is good scientific evidence to support to the fact that singing (more so than normal breathing or talking) increases the possibility of transmission of COVID-19 through the air. Therefore, to start, we may choose not to have any corporate singing.
5. Communal Elements – There would be no passing of offering plates, communion elements, friendship folders, or opening of Bibles/hymnbooks so as to avoid multiple persons coming in contact with the same items.
6. Entry/Exit – We would likely have people stationed at the doors to open and close them so that we do not have multiple people touching the same door handle and

perhaps even consider having ushers release worshippers by row or section following the service.

7. Restricted Access – We would likely limit access to certain parts of the building to avoid having to deep-clean the whole facility each week following worship.

After reading and thinking about all of this, the next logical question that some will ask is, “Well, then why bother?” At what point does one begin to say to themselves, “Well, if you’re going to make me do all of that, I’ll just stay home and we can keep doing what we’re doing!”? It’s a good question and one we are struggling with ourselves. We will be taking all of this and more into consideration as we make plans for when and how to resume corporate worship.

As of today, it is our sense that it will be at least two more weeks before we will resume corporate worship. We will need that much time to create and implement a COVID-19 Preparedness Plan as well as continue to watch and monitor the number of cases and COVID-related deaths that continue to be reported even as more and more restrictions are lifted. If those numbers continue to rise, it seems likely that resumption of corporate worship will continue to be delayed perhaps into July. For now, our best guess for being able to gather together in our sanctuary for worship is Sunday, June 21<sup>st</sup> at the earliest. And even then, perhaps it’s best to wait to get together until such time as we can participate in some (or even all) of the things that make gathering together so special.

There are two other big issues that we are considering right now as well as we explore the possibility of resuming corporate worship. First, many have made this argument: “Well, if you are worried about getting sick then don’t come. Those of us who feel comfortable going out and going to church should not be kept away for the sake of those who don’t.”

This argument seems logical, but the problem with it is that it doesn’t take into account those who don’t have a choice of whether or not to be there. What if I, as the pastor, am worried about getting sick? What if those who operate our sound and media equipment are uncomfortable? Do we have the ability to do what we think is best for us and our families when it comes to attendance at corporate worship?

And there is a second different, but related, problem with that argument. If we decide to start gathering for corporate worship and those who want to and are comfortable doing

so attend, that is great. But then, at the same time, we would likely encourage those who are elderly, immuno-compromised, or otherwise at risk or uncomfortable to not attend so as not to put themselves or others at risk. In communicating this, we are creating a division in the body.

There are those who want to attend, feel comfortable doing so, and will therefore happily attend. And then there are those who want to attend, and may even feel comfortable doing so, but we have told them they can't or shouldn't. This creates a scenario where we are deliberately excluding (or at least discouraging the full participation of) one part of the body so that others parts can fully participate. Is that right? What if those whom we think shouldn't attend, attend anyway? Will we judge them for being here as we make our internal decisions about who should be here and who shouldn't?

And this leads to the final and biggest obstacle that we, as a leadership team, have to account for – The Human Factor. The human factor is the understanding that we could put all of these procedures and guidelines in place and ask people to respect and adhere to them, but the fact is some people will abide by them and others won't. People are people – whether they are in church or in a grocery store. We've all been in that situation – where the sticker on the floor is “way back there” and yet the next person in line at the check-out counter is standing right behind you coughing. They may be comfortable standing right behind you, but you aren't. Do you ask them to step back and risk a confrontation or do you just let it go?

What if someone is sick, but chooses to attend church anyway because they have so desired to for so long now? Should a council member make them go home if they are coughing too much? What if we say no hand-shaking is allowed but someone insists on doing it anyway? What if we say stay 6-feet apart, but then someone walks right up to and tires to give you a hug because they're just so glad to see you again?

And that, quite honestly, is our biggest hurdle as a church leadership. If getting together for worship is going to work, it will require everyone – regardless of whether or not they agree with restrictions – to follow them. Not doing so, puts those in leadership and your fellow worshippers in a difficult situation and puts the church as a whole at risk.

So these are just some of the things that we as a leadership team or trying to balance and decide on as we move forward in our decision-making process about when and how to resume corporate gatherings. We would ask for your patience, prayers, and support as we

discuss these things together and make decisions for the good our community. We are as anxious as all of you to do so and we fully intend to resume corporate worship as quickly and as safely as possible using data, common sense, and the best interests of the community to do so.

But we are also grateful that the success of the ministry of the church is found not in a building, but in Jesus and what he has done. As we continue to walk the road together may we continue to “grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ” (Ephesians 4:15). Thank you all for your patience, support, prayers, and encouragement.

In Service to the King,  
Pastor Michael