

Bethel Church Plan to Reopen Face to Face Worship

May 26, 2020



At our meeting on May 26, the Bethel Council decided to reopen face-to-face church services starting on Sunday, June 7.

Background:

First off, we want to clarify our approach to covid19 concerns -- why we've suspended our programs and gone online with our worship services: This has NOT been because the government is telling us to do so. Many in our country are framing questions about churches being open or closed as a religious rights issue. Our decision-making has not been about this, and never will. **The issue of church programing and face-to-face worship services relate to questions of love and concern for our neighbor.** We've chosen to follow guidelines set by the government thus far because we have deemed them reasonable, and in line with wise public safety. We don't want one of our gatherings to be a "super-spreader" event of covid19, as several church gatherings have been.

If our government ordered us to **cease** worship, we would defy the government -- as countless churches have done through the centuries during times of persecution. These are not those times. As it stands today, we have always been free to worship in smaller groups and worship online ... but in the interest of the safety of the elderly and physically vulnerable, have been told to temporarily suspend our face-to-face gatherings. It should be noted that even those orders by state governors that churches temporarily suspend their face to face gatherings have been challenged by the courts, and will likely not be able to withstand our nation's strong legal protection of churches' rights to free assembly. *But we have chosen to follow, rather than defy those orders because we think it is the morally right, and loving thing to do.*

But circumstances are changing. At this point, we agree with the sentiments of many that the initial period of "stay at home" recommendations have served the purpose of gathering supplies and medical preparation for the fight against covid19, *but that they are unsustainable as a long-term prevention strategy for our society.* **And if people are freely**

about in their work and social lives, it makes no sense for us to continue to restrict our own face-to-face gatherings either. So we will begin offering a face-to-face option for our worship services again, starting Sunday, June 7.

We will do all we can to keep these face-to-face gatherings as safe as we can, and are making a special effort to make it possible for people to continue to be part of our worshipping community, even if they don't personally feel comfortable attending our face to face services.

As we move forward, we will continue to do so with as much wisdom, love, and compassion as God enables us to manifest. Some of the measures we will use as we implement this change (such as maintaining social distance, and the wearing of masks) will be less "enjoyable" for us, but we do so out of love and compassion for others. In addition, we will refrain from judgment or criticism of those who feel differently than we do and thus make different choices about face to face worship.

Our specific measures / guidelines for moving back to worship face to face:

1. *We will follow recommendations to allow at least 6 feet of distance between people in the service. We will set up our chairs in a unique grouping of singles, pairs, groups of four, and some larger groups -- all set up at least 6 to 7 feet away from other groupings of chairs. This will allow families to sit together, but distanced from other groups.*
2. *We will keep doors open in the worship center with our air circulating, taking stale air out, and keeping fresh air in, in order to reduce the likelihood of the spread of any virus particles (for more information, see: <https://www.erinbromage.com/post/the-risks-know-them-avoid-them>).*
3. *For the time being, we will require the wearing of masks in our service, for everyone except for singers and speakers on stage. We understand that the wearing of masks has become politically divisive and controversial. However, evidence reveals how singing in particular poses higher than normal risks for virus transmission. We strongly desire to include singing in our worship experience, and therefore have committed to the wearing of masks as a strategy to offset the increased risks (for more information, see: <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/ppih/if-ppih-covid-19-sag-singing-risk-transmission-rapid-review.pdf>).*
4. *We will provide hand sanitizer in a variety of places around our facility.*
5. *We will clean and disinfect surfaces people will use before each service.*

6. *We will provide disinfectant towels to use in washrooms, to protect against touching common surfaces.*
7. *We will encourage people to maintain social distancing during and after the service, by ushering people out of the service starting from the back and moving to the front.*
8. *We will move our fellowship time to the outdoor area, in order to limit potential virus exposure.*
9. *We will not have child care or children's ministry programs, but instead encourage families to sit and worship together.*
10. *Finally, we will live-stream our worship service so that people who choose to stay at home can participate as well.*

Some might wonder why we are waiting until June to start face to face worship. We need some extra time to ensure that we're able to implement all these procedures in order to make face to face worship work well, and be safe.

Please note two additional qualifiers:

1. No one should feel any pressure or obligation to attend our face to face worship services, if they do not feel safe doing so. That's why we'll be live streaming those services on Sunday mornings.
2. We will continue to monitor the health and safety conditions in our state, and make decisions about our face to face worship accordingly in the months ahead. For example, should instances of covid19 explode around the state, and threaten to overwhelm our health care system, and state officials call for renewed "stay at home" orders, we will reevaluate this decision. But once again, we feel it is prudent to take this step right now, as other gatherings are happening around the state, provided we do so with relatively strong mitigation strategies.