

Email to Members and Friends of Zion, Petoskey

3/17/20

Pastor Matthew Peters



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

*Due to many prayerful considerations, discussions, and concerns of public safety;*

**ZION LUTHERAN, PETOSKEY, IS SUSPENDING ALL PUBLIC AND GROUP WORSHIP, BIBLE STUDIES, MEETINGS, AND GATHERINGS.**

On Saturday, March 14<sup>th</sup>, I wrote an email to the Board of Elders which began by saying, "Things Change Fast..." That email having been written less than 24 hours after I published "Pastor Peters' Initial Response for Zion" via email, facebook, and website. In the "Initial Response" I stated that we would remain open for worship, that we would remain open for Bible Studies, and we would re-evaluate as necessary. In the "Things Change Fast..." email, I asked for, and received many different vantage-points, opinions, and positions from my respected Lay-Leaders concerning Worship, Bible Studies, and Meetings. Out of the results of that email chain I gathered a consensus that we would continue in Worship (for the time being), but would refrain from gathering together in person for Meetings, Bible Studies, and Classes. ...that was Saturday. This is Tuesday.

"Things Change Fast..." was an understatement. Things *have* changed. <full stop>

**Therefore, we need to be thinking about how, as a Church, we will change...**

**What HAS TO change? What SHOULD change? What SHOULD NOT change?**

...let's begin with the last question:

**What SHOULD NOT change? *You.*** As I initially stated, we need to remain God's Children. We need to hold fast to the Word of God. We need to be able, as a Church, to supply means of sharing God's Word and connecting with His people *within the appropriate prescribed limits by our 'Left Hand Kingdom' rulers.* We need to remain as caring, loving, and forgiven as always. Each of us needs to consider how we can "be Jesus" in little ways to the people within our circles of contact and influence. This will mean that Church, and especially my activities as Pastor, will look different. ...and I truly believe that God is preparing us to be something more than we have been, once we come out 'the other side' of the COVID-19 situation.

**What SHOULD change? *Our hearts.*** What has weighed on me the most during these last 6 days has been the attempt to balance the theoretical safety of my neighbor, the predicted case-load of the medical community, the ramifications of a society asked to 'power down' for months at a time, and the absolute NEED to uphold my Ordination Vows and my Call, to hold the Word of God before the eyes of this Congregation and Community. Everyone needs to be thinking broadly; and this may require discomfort, it will mean listening to opinions and ideologies we may not agree with, and through it all we should consider, "What might God be arranging for me to do, according to His mercy, in this?"

**What HAS TO change? *Church.*** ...at least in our ritual and 'usual' practice. It is my opinion, based upon prayerful observation and evaluation of what I feel will be best for Zion, that we need to suspend our usual in-person activities, including corporate worship, immediately and until further notice. I do NOT want to say that Church is 'Cancelled', because I'd rather think of our activities – though separated by distance – actually becoming MORE rather than Less. The decision to 'stay open' or to 'close' has been all-consuming for me, personally, since last week... and I am unable to sustain ministry with that sort of cloud hanging over things.

***Therefore, we are suspending all usual in-person activity at Zion, so that we have room to place our re-doubled energies into some new, innovative, and ultimately more useful and unusual ways of 'being Church'. ...and perhaps become more Christ-like in the process.***

***During this time of 'unusual':***

We, as God's *caring* people, will be forced to call upon those who are disconnected.

We, as God's *praising* people, will find that Worshipping and Studying the Bible as a family is unavoidably necessary.

We, as God's *Salt and Light* people, will 'share' with our neighbors (whether next-door or virtual) what our Church is doing in the meantime, and thereby provide them with a glimpse of our faith and hope in Jesus Christ.

We, as those renewed by the Gospel of Christ, will also be looking for creative, safe, and potentially exciting ways of "getting together" as God's People – virtual comments on live videos, "screen-door" visits to those who are less connected during these months, potential outdoor events that invigorate body and senses around God's Word – there are SO MANY ways that the Church can change!

And there's one more question that needs its answer stated in this:

**What can we NOT AFFORD to do?**

As God's Children, we can simply not afford to do 'nothing.'

I do not pretend that I like the idea of not getting together for worship, or that these changes will be easy... but I hope that our prayers, work, and ideas that follow this letter will move us beyond the point of indecision, fear, and hesitation, and toward a 'New Normal' for us as God's Church.

**Immediate Plans for Zion:**

- Updates and Resources for Worship and Bible Study (Video, Audio, Written, Etc.) will be posted to the Church Website, facebook, and Congregational email list (emails likely twice a week). *If you, or anyone you know does not receive the emails, or does not have access to the internet, please let us know so that we can develop other measures for their care and information.* I strongly encourage parents and grandparents to use this time to nurture and grow the faith and practices of your family, and we will do our part in providing resources to accomplish this.
- Pastoral Care will be available! Telephone, Text Messaging, and 'Screen-Door' visits can be conducted by myself or other Members with wisdom and safety. As other situations arise, we will seek to make careful decisions on an individual basis. I am also prayerfully considering way that we might be able to provide Confession and Absolution as well as Holy Communion to our membership as time progresses... we will keep you posted.
- The Office will be 'Remotely Open'; meaning that Voicemail, Email, and Physical Mail will be received, though with slightly less in-person consistency than you may be used to. Please do not "Just stop by Church" and anticipate that we will be able to receive you or meet with you. However, DO leave a voicemail, email, or text, and we will do our best to get back with you as soon as possible.

*Thank you, dear friends, for being who you are: Caring, Loving, and DEARLY LOVED Children of God!*

*If you have further questions or concerns, please let me know.*

*In Christ,*

- **Rev. Matthew Peters, Pastor**