

May 28, 2020

To Our Mission Hills Church Family,

As your pastors and elders, we want to begin by expressing our deep love and gratitude for you all. These past few months of shelter-in-place have been uniquely trying times. As a church we have had to adapt to new forms of communication, connection and care. In this challenging season of change, we have been so encouraged by your grace, patience, faithfulness, love and commitment to the church. As challenging as this season is, the fruit we are seeing in your lives is a blessed reminder that the Holy Spirit is at work in our hearts, shaping us into the image of his Son Jesus. In short, we are so honored that God has called us to shepherd you in this season.

As you know, one of our core commitments as a church is to prayerfulness – to be with God who is always with us. As your pastors and elders, we believe God has called us to lead prayerful lives. We recognize that we cannot possibly shepherd well apart from an abiding fellowship with our chief Shepherd, Jesus. This is always true, but it has been acutely obvious how important prayer is in this season. The COVID pandemic has thrust us into a season of change as a church. It has presented us with challenging, complex and at times confusing questions to discern.

This week, in particular, has been a challenging time of discernment and decision-making for us. While our decision to stop gathering together in-person eleven weeks ago was fraught with challenging questions of discernment, we believe coming to a decision about starting in-person gatherings again is significantly more complicated. Consequently, this week has been marked by rigorous prayerful conversation for the pastors and the elders.

Without sharing all the complexities involved in discerning the question of “re-opening” the church for in-person gatherings, perhaps it would help to simply mention the updates in civil guidance that have occurred over this past week. First, as many of you know, President Trump announced in a press conference last Friday that “houses of worship” should be identified as “essential” alongside other services and industries that are currently open. As such, he called upon governors to allow churches to “open” immediately for in-person gatherings. However, despite this announcement, State and County mandates and laws remained in effect last Sunday which did not permit us to gather in-person. On Monday, the State of California provided an update in this regard. The State released a lengthy document, which permitted in-person gatherings to begin in accordance with a set of strict guidelines. Then, Tuesday night, the County of San Diego provided further

criteria for San Diego churches to facilitate in-person gatherings, which included another set of lengthy guidelines and requirements.

As these announcements and updates have been issued, we have been in constant dialogue, with one another. We have read and reread the State and County guidelines. We have spoken with the church staff. We have spoken with several other pastors whom we trust and respect about their process of discernment. After a week of prayer, dialogue and study, we have decided not to open the church for in-person gatherings this Sunday. Additionally, we are not, at this time, prepared to give a concrete timeline for the reasons explained below.

This Sunday, we will continue to offer the online service which includes prayer, Scripture reading, worship and a sermon that we have offered the last several weeks. We recognize that this will be welcome news to some of you and disappointing news to others of you. For some of you, the thought of gathering in-person again seems too risky. Perhaps you are a part of one of the medically identified groups that is at greater risk of exposure to COVID. Perhaps you are concerned about those who are higher risk. For others of you, the thought of not having an in-person gathering this Sunday is deflating. While you care about your health and safety, as well as the health and safety of others, you may believe we are at a point of low enough risk that gathering would be wise. Perhaps you have been longing to gather again, waiting for these updates from civil authorities, and now that they have arrived you were hopeful this would mean we could meet.

Over the past several weeks we have spoken directly with many of you over the phone, and we recognize there are a wide spectrum of opinions about the idea of re-opening for in-person gatherings. First, let us say if you have questions or concerns please don't hesitate to reach out. If you do have questions or concerns about our re-opening decision you can email [info@missionhillchurch.org](mailto:info@missionhillchurch.org). That being said, while we certainly cannot answer every possible question or concern regarding this decision here, we do want to provide further explanation in hopes of answering perhaps the two most fundamental questions: why? and when? Why have we decided not to open yet for worship services? When will we gather in-person again?

Our hope here is to be as informative and transparent as we can be regarding the convictions that have guided us through this process of discernment. In doing so, we hope to not only provide clarity about our decision-making, but also provide you with some principles of discernment that can be applied in your own lives as you seek to make wise decisions for you and your family in this season.

We believe a decision to not open for in-person gatherings at this point is wise. As many of you know, wisdom, is one of our core commitments at Mission Hills. Therefore, a good place to start in explaining our process if decision-making is a reminder of our church's statement regarding this commitment to wisdom.

*Because God in Christ shares his life of love with us we are committed to cherish and discern the truth in love. To know and embrace truth we must seek the wisdom of God. True wisdom is found in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the truth. To share in Christ is to share in his wisdom. As we abide in loving relationship with him we are shaped into the kind of family that cherishes and discerns the truth in love. As such we are committed to live life well, relating to God, our neighbor and all of creation in truth and love. Our authoritative Word of Jesus for living well in the world is Holy Scripture.*

As your pastors and elders, we are committed to cherishing and discerning the truth in love. We want to lead, not according to our feelings, but according to what is true. In short, we want to shepherd in reality. This is why, early on, we told you we were going to listen to “experts”. Of course, as many of you know, the challenge in this time is that many credible experts don't agree. So, what do you do when the experts don't agree? What do you do when there is “science” and “data” that validates seemingly opposing views?

We must seek God's wisdom. James 1:5 tells us, *“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who give generously to all without reproach, and it will be given to him.”* As Pastor Jamin often says, wisdom is knowing what to do when the light is yellow. We know what to do when the light is red, we know what to do when the light is green. Some of us treat a yellow light as an opportunity to “make it” and rush through the light. Others panic and screech to a halt before they enter the intersection. Yellow lights though are a moment of discernment in which we need to proceed with caution. Rushing or panicking are the absence of wisdom. The COVID-19 pandemic, if it is anything, is an invitation to proceed with caution.

The decision we have been faced with this week, whether to re-open our church campus for in-person gatherings, has been a “yellow light” decision. As such, we recognize that there will be some churches who do indeed meet this Sunday, and there will be some that don't. Our decision, is in no way a judgment regarding the decisions of other pastors, elders and churches. The circumstances and context of each church are unique and particular, such that a decision in wisdom may look differently for some than for others.

The question is, what is wise for us? As our church's statement on wisdom reminds us, there is one particular source of authority for heeding God's wisdom in a time like this, Holy Scripture. Of course, there is no verse tucked away somewhere in Deuteronomy or Hebrews that tells us the date

and time God has called us to begin gathering again for worship. However, we do believe there are commands of Scripture that provide us with guiding convictions and principles to apply in make a wise decision.

So, what are they? In short summary, these are the commands that are guiding our discernment in this time: *“love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:39),” “be subject to the governing authorities (Romans 13:1),” “never put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother (Romans 14:13).”* So, in brief, we would like to share with you how these commands form guiding convictions in our decision-making.

**First, let us consider the command to love our neighbor.** When Moses sought to clarify what *“loving your neighbor”* means he gave some cases that are instructive, one for example says this, *“When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet (guardrail) for your roof, that you may not bring the guilt of blood upon your house, if anyone should fall from it (Deuteronomy 22:8).”* In other words, take the necessary precautions to protect the life of your neighbor. What precautions can we take in the time of pandemic to protect our neighbors? What Moses expounded was the basic principle of *“don’t take unnecessary risks, rather take every reasonable precaution to protect the life of your neighbor.”* There are a significant number of people in our church who are at greater risk of infection at this time. Our church is also situated within a community (neighbors, co-workers, etc.) in which there are a significant number of people who are at greater risk. The Scripture clearly guides us to take every precaution to guard and protect their lives. This is, in part, how we love our neighbor.

The guidelines provided by the State of California and the County of San Diego, which are designed to create the safest possible environment when hosting in-person gatherings are lengthy, detailed and at times unclear. Executing on these guidelines will require further study, planning, preparation, communication and training that clearly cannot be accomplished by this Sunday. Not only this, but to execute well on the guidelines we will need time, and at this point it isn’t clear how much time we will need to be ready. In order to love our neighbor well, we want to honor these guidelines as best as we are able, in order to create the safest possible environment. We recognize we cannot guarantee a “no-risk gathering,” but we want to be able to say in integrity we have done everything we can to protect and care for you, our church family, and our community.

**Second, let us consider the command to be subject to our governing authorities.** Once again, In Romans 13 we are clearly instructed to *“be subject to our governing authorities.”* Paul reasons in Romans 13 that *“governing authorities”* have been *“instituted by God,”* for he is *“God’s servant*

*for your good (Romans 13:1-4).*” This is a radical statement for Paul to make, in light of the fact that the Roman government would soon execute him and had already executed Jesus. Wherever and whenever possible, Paul encouraged the followers of Jesus to obey the government, even a government that was hostile to them! This means we have a clear mandate to keep this command, unless doing so would cause us to disobey God. At this moment, it means obeying our governing authorities who are asking us to open for in-person gatherings in compliance with a set of strict criteria for safety. The guidelines and requirements are lengthy, but perhaps it would help to list just a few that require significant planning and preparedness. In order to host an in-person gathering we are required to either screen for temperature and/or symptoms everyone who is attending. We must complete and post on our campus, a “Safe Reopening Plan”, which includes among others things measures to ensure social distancing and sanitization procedures. We must ensure gatherings do not exceed 100 people at a time.

As you can imagine, these requirements, along with many others, would necessitate time to communicate, plan, prepare and train in order to execute to the best of our ability. You may feel these requirements are too strict, or you may feel they aren’t strict enough. Once again, our decision is not based on any particular opinion we have of the requirements, but instead a conviction that we are called to both love our neighbor and submit to our civil authorities. Therefore, to the best of our ability we want to fulfill these requirements.

**Third, and finally, Scripture teaches us to “*never put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.*”** We recognize that some believe the church gathering is of such great value and importance that we should come together regardless of whether we can meet government requirements. We recognize that many feel this way because of their deep belief in the importance of gathering together in-person to worship God, and their deep desire to be with their church family. These are of course, good and true beliefs and desires. However, if we move forward to meet, it would place many in our church family in a compromised position in which they may be asked to violate their conscience. To not be patient in seeking to meet every requirement of our governing authorities, to some, would be a clear act of disobedience in submitting to our governing authorities and consequently a rejection to love our neighbor well. The principle the apostle Paul outlines in Romans 14 is that “*the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions (Romans 14:1).*” The strong are to move toward the weak. What Paul means by this is that there are those whose consciences are more sensitive than others to certain issues, that to practice certain things would offend and harm their conscience. In Paul’s context the issues varied from which holy days to

celebrate, to which kinds of food were ok to eat. Paul observed that there were differing opinions on these matters and he was most concerned that Christians would “*pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding (Romans 14:19).*”

Church family, God is calling us to remain united. This is critical to remember. Much would seek to divide us in this time. We must vigilantly pursue unity. Unity is not found in our shared political opinions, nor in our agreement about how to properly respond to the COVID pandemic. Instead, our unity is in Christ alone. Some of us may be disappointed we are not gathering, while others may believe we should wait a long-time before we even consider it. Some of us believe the government guidelines for meeting are unreasonable, while others believe they are wise. Many of us, quite simply, aren't sure what to think about it all. We may have differing opinions on these matters, that is ok. We must not permit these differences to divide us. As Paul says in Ephesians 4:3, we must be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” We must not forget what most fundamentally defines who we are and we must not forget what we most fundamentally believe. *We are a church family called in love to share in and be shaped by Christ our hope.*

As those who share in Christ, we are brothers and sisters, drawn into the household of God the Father almighty by the accomplished work of our Savior Jesus Christ. We are those who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who is shaping us to become children that live and act like the Eternal Son, Jesus. May we be reminded, as those called in love, we are called to love one another with the love we have received. And what does it mean to love? We read in 1 Corinthians 13 that love “*is patient and kind*”, that love “*is not arrogant or rude*”, that love “*does not insist on its own way*”, that love “*rejoices with the truth*”, that “*love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*” May we be united in our shared faith in Christ, our identity as beloved children of God the Father Almighty, and in the love we have for one another wrought forth by the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. May we seek to outdo one another in sacrifice for the well-being, safety and good of one another. May we be known in our community by this love we have.

We have answered the “why” question, but have said little about “when”. When will we meet? At this time, we do not have a specific date in mind. What we can say, is that we do not believe the timeline is months, but more like weeks. However, until we can answer some of the questions above, we will refrain from giving a definitive timeline. We will seek to communicate with you as promptly and clearly as we can when we know our first in-person gathering will be happening. For now, what we want you to hear is that we will meet when we believe in wisdom we

can do so in a manner that loves our neighbors, submits to our governing authorities and is properly sensitive to not do so in a manner that causes a brother or sister in our family to stumble. May we remember, that we gather, not because any government order has told us we can, not because any religious leader has told us we must, not because we want to exercise our constitutional rights, but because God himself has called us in love. When we gather, we do so in response to God's calling to share in and be shaped by Christ. We do so to be with the God who is in our midst, and worship him in spirit and in truth.

Church, we will gather again, and when we do, we will not gather in a manner that looks powerful in worldly terms. No matter what, we will gather in weakness. This much is evident. And so, ought we be dismayed by such limitations, such frailties in our gathering? Certainly not! When we gather, may we do so in order to *“boast all the more gladly in weakness, so that the power of Christ may tabernacle upon us”* (2 Cor. 12:9).

In Christ,

The Pastors & Elders of Mission Hills Church