

Dear Hometown Church,

Greetings! May you experience grace and peace during this time of worldwide and church upheaval. Ultimately, our peace in these confusing times comes from walking with our Savior who rules completely and works out His plans thoroughly. We are comforted by this verse “For I know the plans I have for you. They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11) God has plans for his people! We had our own plans for how we would relaunch as Hometown Church, but it’s become clear to us that God had better plans – plans that have united us as a church, increased our use of technology, and expanded our reach.

We deeply desire to gather in our buildings for in person Sunday services once again. God himself is relational and He created us in His image as relational beings who need community and fellowship. As you may be realizing, we can only experience so much of that through video calls and text messages. Thankfully, with technology like Zoom, we can experience some degree of community.

Some of us have wondered if the nature of the church is at stake. We are exhorted to not “neglect gathering with one another” (Hebrews 10:25). However, the truth is still being preached (online), and people have been gathering in small groups (online). Through most of Christian history, the church has met in homes. Church can be church in homes. This pandemic highlights how important small groups are to the life and vitality of Hometown Church. Church is not a building. It never has been.

The good news is that the stay-at-home order has been lifted in Minnesota and we can once again start to gather in social groups of 10 or less and also enjoy restaurants and stores that are in the process of reopening. Unfortunately, large groups are not allowed to meet, which means that Sunday church services will continue to be “online only.”

The hope is that covid-19 would not spread at an alarming and overwhelming rate and that the state could continue to loosen restrictions allowing larger and larger groups to gather in person. However, one thing seems inevitable – even as restrictions are lifted, groups of people (especially larger groups) will be asked to follow social distancing guidelines for quite some time. Hometown’s Senior Leadership Team (SLT) has been studying and monitoring what these guidelines could mean for church services and the efforts that churches are going through to make onsite services happen. You really wouldn’t believe it; so, we included some of the protocols at the bottom of this letter.

In our review of large group church meetings with social distancing, one thing we have realized is that by nature it just clashes with the culture of Hometown Church. We are a church that highly values community, we are very close relationally, we like to be close physically with hugs/handshakes/fist bumps, we love to hangout, and, as you know, we have a lot of kids who like to play with each other. We feel that all of those strengths, which tie right into our culture, would make a social distancing service very limiting and frustrating to us.

So, when? When can we plan to get back to Sunday services in our building?

Because we want to be respectful towards the governing authorities (Romans 13:1-5), and because we want to be compassionate towards those with higher risk, and because the strong must be considerate of those of a weaker conscience (Romans 15:1-3), we will follow the guidelines given to us by Governor Walz.

**When groups of 250+ are allowed to meet WITHOUT social distancing guidelines, we will start meeting together as a church on Sunday mornings.**

In the meantime,

- From now through Labor Day, if large groups are allowed to gather, but with social distancing recommendations, we will continue to do online-only Sunday services. Depending on the recommended social distancing guidelines, the emotional and physical costs (listed above) will be too high.
- Now that smaller groups are allowed to meet WITH social distancing protocols, we will encourage our small groups to meet following those guidelines.
- If social distancing continues to be recommended for large groups beyond Labor Day, we will re-evaluate, and consider gathering on Sunday mornings with social distancing guidelines in place.
- When an announcement is made that 250+ are allowed to meet without social distancing, it may take some time before we actually meet in person on a Sunday morning. We will need time to assess our volunteers and be ready to act on any new protocols.

We are all desiring to gather again as a church family. Even if we are unable to meet as large groups soon, there will be other opportunities to gather in small and medium sized groups and reestablish connections and relationships.

**When small to medium sized groups are able to gather, we will encourage the following:**

- Small Groups gather in person over the summer months.
- Host Sunday morning “watch parties” of the weekend service with your Small Group or friends.
- Participate in Mission to Our City in small to mid-sized groups.
- Find other ways to serve our community in smaller groups.
- Think of other creative ways to gather, encourage one another, challenge each other and share life together.

Here is a summary chart of a phased approach to re-opening church gatherings as the state guidelines are adjusted over time:

	<b>Phase 0 - Stay at Home</b>	<b>Phase 1</b>	<b>Phase 2</b>	<b>Phase 3</b>	<b>Phase 4 - Normal</b>
<b>State guidelines</b>	Essential travel only Social distancing in public Direct family only	Social distancing in public Small family gatherings	Small Groups (under a certain qty) allowed WITH social distancing	Larger groups allowed (Qty TBD) WITH social distancing	Large groups (250+) allowed WITHOUT social distancing
<b>Church group meetings allowed</b>	Video conferencing	Video conferencing (other mtgs at your own discretion)	<u>Smaller gatherings</u> Adult small groups Teen small groups Bible studies Service watch parties	<u>Larger gatherings</u> Same as Phase 2 Multiple small groups together Hometown Teens?	All
<b>Sunday service options</b>	Online only	Online only	Online (alone or with a watch party)	Online (alone or with a watch party)	Onsite AND Online

*Note: this will be re-evaluated after Labor Day*

So, as we wait for things to open up more and more, we encourage you to be the church that “has left the building.” Look for the unique opportunities God is providing for you to love your neighbors. Reach out to them. Take the opportunity to listen to their stories, pray for them, share a meal with them. And if the opportunity presents itself, share your story of hope. Remember, they are probably more anxious about life than you are.

We are continuing to plan a 2020 Mission To Our City (MTOC) this summer. Stay tuned for a special Covid-19 version of MTOC. Also, please consider this as a unique time of slowing down to seek God. He is allowing us an extended sabbatical from “normal” ministry, to fill us up and prepare us for service and good deeds in the future.

We are trusting that the Lord will not just continue to sustain us, but that He will cause our outreach and our giving to continue to expand during this time. We thank you for your prayers and support.

God bless!

Hometown’s Senior Leadership Team

Below are some of the potential protocols churches are using for services with social distancing guidelines:

- Taking temperatures of each individual prior to entry
- Requiring masks on every person who enters the building
- Six feet of separation between all non-family members— in all directions.
- Updated seating plans in facility
- Requiring attenders to register for their seat in advance, then check-in upon arrival
- Documenting where each person is sitting during the services should a positive covid case and potential outbreak occur after the service
- No handshakes or hugging
- No “meet and greet” time
- No refreshments or cookies
- No childcare services, at least initially (it is virtually impossible to keep children separated)
- A social distancing capacity of 50% of the full capacity
- Many extra services to try to accommodate live services for smaller quantities

Additionally, these are other *potential* consequences of conducting services with social distancing-

- There would be extra work (e.g. sanitizing, enforcing new rules), landing on fewer volunteers, because many volunteers may wish to stay at home.
- Distraction will increase, as children are required to be in the service.
- Children will not have the ability to abide by social distancing protocols. Infractions will greatly frustrate some people.
- Frustration and anger may occur between adults, as some adults ignore social distancing protocols. We recognize and understand that there are differing views on the seriousness of the virus. However, to ignore social distancing recommendations could lead to strained relationships and a divided congregation.
- There would be very little visitor traffic. Most people will not risk their health to attend large group gatherings, even with social distancing protocols in place.
- Many of our own people, especially those in the higher risk category, will be reluctant to attend. Our attendance will be reduced. And our church may become more divided between people who think, “The virus risk is overblown” and those who think, “The virus is dangerous.”
- Liability and responsibility – if an outbreak were to occur after someone showed up to one of our services after unknowingly having covid-19, the church could be considered liable (or at least held responsible by the community itself) for putting the lives of our attenders and the lives of others in our community at risk.