

REOPENING SOON? I HOPE SO!

Dear Church Family,

As we all know, the COVID-19 pandemic has stretched on far longer than we ever anticipated when our in person activities were shut down almost a year ago. And if you're feeling frustrated by how all of this has impacted your life, your family, our community, and our church family, I'm right there with you. Believe me, I've had enough of masks, hand washing, distancing, and Zoom to last a lifetime.

However, the pandemic continues. By the time you read this, casualties in the United States will have surpassed 507,000, more than World War II and the wars in Korea, Vietnam, The Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, and Iraq combined, in just a little over a year. I suspect all of us know people who've been seriously ill, and some of us are grieving the loss of loved ones. I lost a friend of 37 years last month, the wife of a colleague in ministry, and I've known many other friends and colleagues who've had a rough time with this disease.

However, there is good news. As I write this, the numbers seem to be moving in the right direction, at last. They're not quite down to the level they were last October, when we considered reopening before the winter surge began, but we're getting close. And some of us have already received one or both doses of the vaccine, and that number will certainly increase in the weeks ahead.

Over the last couple of days, the clergy of our Conference met for a Zoom version of our annual get-together, "The Gathering." Of course, the pandemic was the focus of virtually all of our discussions. Some congregations in low COVID areas have reopened or are planning to do so, and a great deal of our conversation concerned how, and when, the rest of our churches will be able to resume in-person worship and activities.

When *will* we be able to gather again? The answer is...tune in next week! The Conference COVID Response Team will meet in a few days, and will issue new recommendations soon after. The new guidelines will include how we can include those who have been vaccinated as a factor, and may have some additional recommendations on how we can make in-person activities possible soon.

I recently learned that some of our members have been attending worship in other churches that are already open, in addition to viewing our online services. I can certainly understand why. We all have spiritual needs that we haven't been able to meet, at least in the ways that we always have, during the last year. There's never a Sunday that I'm not exceedingly proud of our online worship team, most of whom are volunteers, and of how we're able to offer high-quality virtual worship to our Congregation, better, in my opinion, than many services of churches many times our size with a much larger group of paid staff. And yet, I know that no online service can truly replace being in a worship space in person, experiencing the service with other people.

There are churches in the valley that have reopened; however, there are also many churches of many denominations that, like our Congregation, remain shut down. I'm not casting aspersions on other pastors, their decisions, or the reasoning they used. I can only speak for my own decisions, and those of our Conference leaders. I know we live in a divisive time, and it's easy to feel frustrated, or ignored. I promise you, with the greatest sincerity that I can, that the decisions we've made aren't based on political correctness, a desire to prove a point, or on any agenda other than to keep the people of our congregation and others safe from a potentially lethal disease. Using the best information we have amassed, being in indoor gatherings is not yet safe in our area, and the new, more contagious varieties of COVID from Britain and South Africa are now in the United States. However, we're also hopeful that because the vaccines are also effective with the

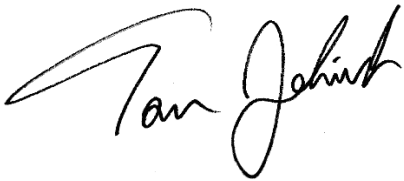
new strains, there won't be a new surge in cases. I strongly encourage all of our church family to join me in getting vaccinated as soon as the protocols allow!

I also ask that if you do worship at another location, *PLEASE BE AS SAFE AS POSSIBLE! PLEASE WEAR AT LEAST ONE MASK, PREFERABLY TWO*, even or especially if others present are not wearing them. *PLEASE KEEP APPROPRIATE DISTANCE FROM OTHERS*, especially if they're singing, speaking prayers, or reciting liturgy. *PLEASE AVOID HANDLING ITEMS THAT OTHERS ARE TOUCHING, AND WASH YOUR HANDS FOLLOWING THE SERVICE*. And if you're not attending worship in person now, I ask that you wait, with the majority of our congregation and me, just a little while longer.

I promise you, once again, that no one wants to start in person activities more than I do! I believe it won't be long until it will be safe to be together. In the meantime, please join me in a prayer that God will pour out God's healing mercy upon those who are now infected with COVID, that God will sustain health care and essential workers, teachers, parents, and others who have been and are under incredible strain. Please pray that God will grant courage and wisdom to our Conference and Church Leaders, as they consider major decisions in the days ahead. And please pray that, with God's guidance and blessing, our Congregation and others will soon be able to open our doors once again.

May God be with us all, in our journey through Lent, and always.

In Christ's service,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Tom Jelinek". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Tom" and last name "Jelinek" clearly distinguishable.

Tom Jelinek, Pastor