



May 6, 2020

## Friends -

### Spring greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior!

I have several things that I want to update you on and had originally thought to do so via video. Then I remembered that I am sorely in need of a haircut! More importantly, I realized that the amount of news that I wish to share would push the video into something approaching "sermon length," which I could not impose upon you in good conscience.

I hope and pray that this note finds you healthy and bearing up as well as possible under the strain of living through this pandemic and the attending financial turbulence. I pray also that you are finding encouragement through the Holy Spirit, present in your times of quiet and prayer, and present through the church. While we are not worshiping as we may want, we are worshiping. Although we are not meeting in fellowship as we commonly desire it, we are grateful for the opportunities to connect via technology, even as we wait for better times. As we go forward, let us keep our eyes fixed upon Jesus, our living hope.

### Moving Toward Reopening FPC

Balancing hope and caution, your leadership is working hard to answer the question of when best to reopen the church for worship and other activities under the guidance of state and local authorities. **As of this writing, we will maintain a tentative goal of reopening for worship on Sunday, May 31**, a date consistent with most other churches in the city and the strong request of the leaders in the Texas Medical Center (TMC). A survey requesting your perspective on resuming on-campus worship will be distributed this week. Please take a moment to complete it.

It is important that we use that word *tentative*, as we are closely monitoring infection trends here in Houston while also working through the guidelines established by Governor Abbott, the TMC, and local city and county leadership. As I'm sure you can understand, a significant change in the rate of spread of infection or a challenge in the safe implementation of the guidelines for gathering could impact that goal.

As you may know, the Governor's reopening guidelines for churches are quite specific with respect to room capacity, screening, cleaning, the use of masks, and physical distancing. If you want to read these guidelines, you can find them [here](#).

In their meeting last week, Session established a Reopening Task Force that is composed of members of Session, staff, and others who are meeting frequently to determine the wisest path toward reopening the building for worship and other activities. The team's assignment is to bring a preliminary report to Session at the May 19 meeting. **Knowing that you will have many questions, my goal is to provide you with an update as soon as possible after the May 19 Session meeting. Stay tuned for more details!**

### A Word on Worship

Several words, actually. First of all, please know that even after we reopen the building for in-person worship, we intend to continue offering a live-streamed worship service. I share this because we know that many of you may not feel comfortable coming on campus for some time after we reopen. In addition, it is important to acknowledge the likelihood that we will be required to worship under both capacity and physical distancing restrictions for much longer than just a few weeks.

Second, as I have said several times publicly, our caution in approaching the reopening of our campus and our sanctuary is not motivated by fear. We take this caution out of a desire to care for and love our church family—not just those of us who are considered among the most vulnerable population, but all of our members—and our community. I know (and agree) that "online" worship and fellowship is not the worship experience we desire, but thanks be to God, we can still worship!

Finally, I want to give you a heads up to the fact that our next two worship services (May 10 and May 17) will both be *pre-recorded*. We are pre-recording for two reasons. The first is that we are doing some long-awaited repairs and painting in the sanctuary and need to be out of that space until mid-May. The second reason is that pre-recording allows us to be more creative in the construction of the service. It allows us to film in different venues, to incorporate video from others, and to experiment with different formats. I'll be interested in your response as we seek to try—and learn from—some new approaches.

### Giving And Expenses

While our Treasurer, Matt Malinsky, is a far better person to give you details regarding giving and expenses (and will soon), I want to report that giving to FPC remains healthy, even as we enter into our second month of disrupted worship and fellowship. Please join me in a prayer of gratitude to God for His faithfulness to the First Pres family at this time. And please allow me to thank you so very much for allowing our Lord to demonstrate His faithfulness through your faith and generosity. Thank you for supporting the ministries of your church, which we pray are having an impact in your homes, our neighborhood, and even across our city.

At the same time, I want to assure you that we are also endeavoring to be good stewards of the resources that have been entrusted to us. Because we are facing economic uncertainty from the twin challenges of the pandemic-related shutdown and the collapse in oil prices, your Session voted to trim ministry expenses by 10% effective June 1. In addition, we are preparing several different contingency plans and will be ready to respond as we get a clearer picture of what things look like for FPC.

Please join us in praying that your Session and staff will be able to strike just the right balance of faith in God's provision and response to His call that we be wise stewards of His gifts.

### Here To Serve

First, many thanks to those of you who have been giving toward the fulfillment of the pledge you made last fall. At the same time, we recognize that many of us have had our world turned "upside-down" since March 15, and we want you to know that we have been praying for you regularly. If you are in a position to give in this season, we give thanks. If, however, you find yourself unable to do so, we want you to know that we understand. Frankly, it is our hope that somehow your church can be here to support you at this time. Please do not hesitate to let me know if there is anything that we can do for you.

I would also like to share that Session recently voted, on the recommendation of the Board of Trustees, to postpone all of the Here to Serve construction projects that were planned for this summer. These projects, which included our remodel of the children's ministry spaces and some work on the second floor, have not been canceled. They have simply been postponed until we have a better sense of the economic realities facing our city and our church. At the same time, we are going ahead with several facility renewal projects, such as the painting in the sanctuary and the replacement of dry-rotted windows and doors. These projects will be funded out of a pre-existing maintenance reserve and do not require the use of Here to Serve funds.

The last thing I'll share on this subject is perhaps the most obvious. We simply don't know what kinds of impact the economic downturn and the extended period of restricted access to the FPC campus will have on our church. As we get better information, it is possible that we may need to re-prioritize some things as we look at how to best serve our future, our neighborhood, and our city. Please know that we will include you in that conversation. Your feedback was essential to the development of the initial plans for Here to Serve -- and we don't want to go forward from here without the benefit of your good thinking—more on this to come.

### Finally

In closing, I simply pray, friends, that you will continue to feel some form of encouragement in the Lord as we walk this journey together. We will continue to provide our daily messages of encouragement, our online discipleship programs, weekly services of prayer and worship, and opportunities to care for one another and to serve our neighbors. And again, if you have a need or are looking for a way to join those who are collaborating to serve our community, please visit our **Serve or Be Served** page available [here](#). Until we are reunited in one place...

May the Lord give us courage, perseverance, hope—and even joy—as we place our trust in Him.

May God bless you—and may God bless First Pres—that we might be a blessing to others.

### In and for Christ,

**Jim Birchfield**  
Senior Pastor

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