

In 2004 Mayor George Heartwell read Jeremiah 29:7 at my installation service. They are words God spoke to a people living lives far different from the lives they once enjoyed. Mayor Heartwell left out the phrase “into exile” that afternoon. But the whole verse seems appropriate in these days. *“But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”*¹ Both the Prophet and the Mayor reminded me then and remind me now that advancement of the common good is a metric for ministry’s success.

Right now our very lives depend on seeking the welfare of every city, looking out not only for our own interests, but also for the interests of others. When we exiled ourselves from our church buildings, we all expected to return to them long before now. So we made temporary plans for doing church differently. I am indeed ready for this exile – separation from my family, virtual replacements for all things in-person, working from home, limited socializing options, and the mandate to reinvent almost all my comfortable routines – to end. Yet, everything I know about the situation in which we find ourselves tells me that **we must continue the suspension of in-person church gatherings for the foreseeable future.** Three facts brought me to this conclusion.²

Staying home flattens the curve and saves lives, but it does not kill the virus.

“Whenever we return to our jobs, schools and community gatherings—be it this spring, summer or fall—infections will rise. It’s not a prediction. It’s a biological fact.”³

We are in this for the long haul.

“The spread of COVID-19 has been, and still is, largely predictable based on objective and publicly available data. The coronavirus will persist until there is either (a) a safe vaccine (still 12 to 18 months away) or (b) until there is “herd immunity,” whereby two-thirds of the nation (about 200 million people) must become infected, recover and develop the appropriate antibodies. This, too, will take at least a year.”⁴

The numbers will tell us when it is safe to ‘re-open’

The number that guides public health officials’ responses to communicable diseases is called the R_0 (pronounced “R naught”). It represents “the average number of unvaccinated (or

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (1989). (Je 29:7). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

² Dr. Robert Pearl, M.D. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robertpearl/2020/04/21/3-coronavirus-facts/#197fc37b4721> Dr. Pearl served as CEO of The Permanente Medical Group, the largest medical group in the nation, and as president of the Mid-Atlantic Permanente Medical Group. In these roles, he was responsible for 10,000 physicians, 38,000 staff and the medical care of 5 million Americans. He authored the Washington Post bestseller, “Mistreated: Why We Think We’re Getting Good Healthcare--And Why We’re Usually Wrong,” and is a board-certified plastic and reconstructive surgeon, a clinical professor of surgery at Stanford University, and on the faculty of the Stanford Graduate School of Business.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

otherwise vulnerable) people who will contract a disease from one contagious individual. The actual number depends not only on the biology of the disease but on the actions people take.

- *If R_0 is more than 1.0...the number of infected people will rise and the number of individuals needing critical care can quickly surge.*
- *If R_0 equals 1.0, the infection rate will remain constant (though the curve will be flat) and there won't be a future spike (or second wave).*
- *If R_0 is less than 1.0, the disease incidence will decline, and the virus will slowly die out.”⁵*

We can follow the R_0 trend up or down by watching the number of new COVID-19 cases diagnosed daily in our communities. **Regardless of government recommendations only when the number of new COVID-19 cases has trended downward for a 2 to 8 weeks will it be safe to begin a phased return to in-person church gatherings.** When the number of new cases trends up (as in a second wave) we know it is time to resume our self-exile from in-person church gatherings.

What does this mean for our churches? The longer the decline in new cases, the broader our hosting of in-person gatherings can extend. Even with stay-at-home measures in effect currently, Arizona is experiencing a 5%+ daily increase, New Mexico is experiencing a 2% daily increase, and last week El Paso County, TX experienced a 12% increase in diagnosed new cases of COVID-19. No region in the Southwest Conference has met the CDC's standard for returning to public gatherings.

[We will return to in-person gatherings.](#)

A day will come when self-exile from our church buildings can end. When we do return to our in-person gatherings we will do so in small and measured ways at first. Not all churches will resume in-person gatherings at the same time. Group sizes will be limited because we will need to follow public health and medical best practices and maintain social distancing. Some people will return to public activities only when they personally feel safe doing so, thus ministry in virtual ways will need to continue even after the pandemic is declared to be over. Major adjustments, including wearing masks and gloves, will be necessary for many reasons, among them, helping people feel safe being together again.

This week I am sharing a resource to help local church leaders make the best possible decisions about when and how their churches can resume hosting in-person worship, funerals, weddings, small groups, charitable work, and other activities. All of us want our decisions to reflect our deep and abiding love for one another and for our neighbors. The resource draws on the best wisdom from public health officials, medical professionals, and Church leaders around the country and around the world. My primary concern compiling this resource is the health and wellbeing of the people in our congregations and our communities.

⁵ Ibid.

Even a pandemic can't stop us from being the Church!

I am inspired by the ways in which our local church leaders are collaborating, innovating, and adapting to meet the needs of your neighbors generously and courageously.

- St. Paul's UCC in Rio Rancho partnered with the Sandoval County Federation of Democratic Women to distribute \$1405 in gift cards so kids wouldn't go hungry.
- Church of the Palms is closer to purchasing a shower trailer to serve clients of their ongoing ministries for people without permanent housing.
- The United Church of Santa Fe has partnered with local restaurants to provide more than 100 lunches twice each week for the guests of Santa Fe Interfaith Shelter, and monthly dinners for St. Elizabeth's Shelter and Casa Familia Shelter, with the goals of feeding people who are hungry while supporting a local businesses.
- First Congregational Church of Flagstaff has partnered with Pueblo de Flagstaff in a mutual aid campaign raising more than \$58,000 to provide \$500 grants to immigrant families in need and excluded from new COVID-19 government assistance programs.
- Our chaplains are accompanying critically ill patients and bridging the gap between dying patients and family members unable to be with loved ones in their final hours.

Our couches may have become our pews, but our communities remain the focus of our service and our love!

Active pastoral care, faith formation, and justice advocacy continue in all our ministry settings. Most Southwest Conference churches are experiencing steady or increased attendance in online worship and small groups. While funding streams for many congregations are steady, some churches have seen their incomes decline since we haven't been passing our offering plates on Sunday mornings. Your local church needs your financial support now more than it ever did! We are being church in vital and vibrant ways. Please share your resources generously and regularly with your local congregation.

Looking forward

In June, the staff and I, with the support of the Executive Board, will begin planning for a virtual annual meeting. Translating our largest Conference gathering into an online event will take time and innovation. We've learned much from our recent Ecclesiastical Council webinar experiences. Please continue to save the dates – October 2-4, 2020 – for a series of webinars and/or zoom meetings that will include Conference-wide worship, business sessions, and small group gatherings. We will share details as they are finalized over the next several months.

Staff will continue to work from home indefinitely. Barb and I are available to visit your churches online; we anticipate that our in-person Conference travel will be suspended through the end of the year. We look forward to sharing with you in worship, at your council/board

meetings, and in small group discussions. Coffee hours and happy hours are also welcome invitations!

Regular check-in zoom calls with clergy, chaplains, and local church moderators and treasurers will continue.

As we settle into the long-game of being the Church during a pandemic and move out of pandemic crisis management, we can turn our attention to other long-game tasks of visioning and planning. What we have all been through and the lessons we've learned from it will certainly impact what we do and how we do it in the years to come. The inspiring work you began through our SOAR process will continue. Two follow-up webinars with Dr. Stavros are being planned for later this summer. Watch for updates via *In the Loop* and by email.

While Jeremiah's encouragement to seek the welfare of our cities guides me in these moments of exile, John's vision of Church as the Holy City, *new Jerusalem*, stirs my hope for our future.

Then I saw new heavens and a new earth; for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea existed no longer. ² I also saw a new Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down out of heaven from God, beautiful as a bride and groom on their wedding day. ³ And I heard a loud voice calling from the throne,

"Look, the home of God is among mortals.

God will live with them.

They will be God's peoples, and God will be fully present among them.

⁴ The Most High will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

And death, mourning, crying, and pain will be no more, for the old order has fallen."

⁵ And the one who sat on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new."⁶

A new earth is upon us indeed. And for this new earth a new Church – the new Jerusalem – is required. Whatever newness there will be, God still lives among us! We are still God's people! God still holds us in our grief and promises us that after the tasks of release, after expressing its sting and feeling the fear of letting go, after the previous order yields to the next order of things, we will certainly have a new beginning. We are now only glimpsing what is emerging. Trusting that what awaits us will be good, will be *as* good, could even be better, is hard right now. Trusting gets easier when we remember that God is the One making all things new.

In Christ love,

+Bill

⁶ *The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation* by Priests for Equality. (Re 21:1–5).