



SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

TRACY SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

March 3, 2021

Dear Tracy Church Family,

As you may have heard by now, we are planning to resume in-person, indoor worship on March 6, which is almost exactly a year to the day that we held our last service in the sanctuary. At our February meeting, the church board voted to pursue reopening in light of the recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling. Since then, our COVID committee has been working hard to make sure we are following all of the protocols to make the experience as safe as possible. (Please see the separate document outlining the various safety requirements.)

While these requirements are designed to keep everyone as safe as possible, there will be a risk in coming to church in-person. I know some of us support this decision to resume gathering together despite the risks. However, as much as I miss seeing all of you on Sabbath mornings my heart is heavy for two reasons.

First, there are a significant number of us who are either in one of the several high-risk categories or simply not comfortable with gathering indoors yet, so meeting in person will only be for some of our members, not all. I had hoped that since we had paused meeting together as a whole, we would have chosen to resume meeting together as whole. We will continue to livestream the worship services - though as we all are aware, watching them from home is not the same as being there in person. The decision to restart in-person services knowing that some of us will not be able to be fully included was not the unifying result for which I had hoped.

Second, COVID-19 is still wreaking havoc on a large scale. Yes, there is good news that the numbers have greatly improved from the peak in early January, but the statistics remain grim. The U.S. is averaging 70,000 new infections and 2,000 deaths per day, which is what the 2020 summer peak was. California is averaging 5,500 new infections and 300 deaths per day, with our own county still being in the Purple Tier. We are all experiencing pandemic fatigue, but we cannot let our guard down. As vaccines are becoming more readily available, their effectiveness might be hampered if we allow the transmission of dangerous coronavirus variants to escalate. While having in-person worship with a few dozen people might not seem to make much difference, people have used similar reasoning to justify indoor gatherings for the past year. Such gatherings continue to contribute to the virus's spread and to the death toll of over half a million Americans.

As a pastor, I'm pained to find myself in a position of discouraging public worship attendance. Yet, as we hear every day, these are unprecedented times. The truth of the matter is that the thing we are

looking forward to regaining the most from gathering in-person, the interpersonal connection, is not truly going to be available – at least not for the foreseeable future. What makes coming together face-to-face on Sabbaths special are the hugs and handshakes, the connections made while snacking in the hospitality center, the singing together, the conversations that happen while lingering after the service, and the potlucks shared in the BLC; none of these things are really an option at this point. With such a limited communal worship experience, is the risk to our loved ones, fellow members, and wider community worth it?

And yet, I am obviously torn. I feel the desire to meet again on Sabbath mornings deep in my heart, as I'm sure you do as well. At the same time, I am not wanting any of us to be exposed to this virus and come to harm due to gathering in the sanctuary. It is not an easy choice to make for any conscientious congregation. Other local churches are struggling with the same weighty decision. Some of the Adventist churches in our area have already reopened their buildings; others aren't even discussing the possibility for at least another month.

So, as your pastor, I continue to wrestle with this tension. This is why I am working to implement the board's decision and have an in-person worship option for those of us who are willing to take the risk. But, I also want to make it abundantly clear that if you are not up to regathering yet, you are still a valued member of our church family. Nobody should feel pressured to come just because the doors are now opened. To help alleviate any perceived pressure, as well as to help protect my loved ones and limit community spread, I will not be attending indoor services regularly every Sabbath – at least until our county is in the Red Tier or until vaccines are more fully available.

No matter if you come to the sanctuary this Sabbath or in a few weeks or in a couple of months, remember that you and I continue to be the church regardless. And while gathering to worship together is indeed helpful in our spiritual journeys, it is not the source of life; the source is Christ alone. May we all remain close to the Source throughout these difficult and trying times!

God bless,
Pastor Tyler