

Friends, I'm starting to understand our churches namesake, St. Paul, more than I would like. To the people in Rome, Paul writes: *For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.* And to the people in Thessalonica he writes: *As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you—in person, not in heart—we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face.* While worshiping on a computer screen is not what I was called to St. Paul's U.C.C. to do, I recognize that, as is written in Esther, *And who knows but that you have come to your position for such a time as this?*

I miss you all terribly and wish that things would just go back to the way they were. Yet, I know that this is not where we find ourselves at this time. Please know that my and the consistory's biggest concern is your safety and the safety of our gathered community. Over the past few weeks, I have become an expert on Zoom conferencing, participating in conference calls with the Wisconsin Council of Churches, the national setting of the United Church of Christ, the Wisconsin Conference of the U.C.C., our local cluster of U.C.C. clergy in Sheboygan and Manitowoc counties, and the State of Wisconsin Department of Health Services. I also receive daily updates from the Sheboygan County Health Department. I have tried to share this information with you via the church website and my daily video messages.

On Thursday, May 27, the consistory met once again via zoom to discuss all that is going on in the life of the church, as well as how to proceed in this time of Covid-19. The most critical concern is being able to open without jeopardizing the health of our members, particularly those over 65 and members with other health issues who are at greatest risk from Covid-19. After two hours of serious discussion about how we might respond to reopening the church, the consistory came up with a few ideas.

1. While opinions varied, the consensus was that we are not ready to open our church doors to resume in person worship
2. The consistory (included in this letter and online) will be polling the congregation as to their feelings on when to begin resuming in person activities at the church, as well as encouraging ideas to help foster community among our members

3. The consistory has agreed to meet every two weeks to discuss this situation until we reach some sort of normalcy and reopen our physical church
4. Online worship will continue even when we begin to meet again in person, as it gives many people options to engage in the worship life of St. Paul's U.C.C.

I know that some of you are saying, “the bars are open, so why isn’t the church?” The current guidance states: *At this time, WI Department of Health and Human Services and the Sheboygan County Division of Public Health does not advise large gatherings, and there is no projected timeframe available as to when this advisory would change. Public health experts agree that large gatherings of people in sustained, close contact greatly increases the risk for spread of the virus among those who attend the events and to the communities these individuals return to after the event. The communal nature of such events makes it especially challenging to accommodate the physical distancing and sanitation recommendations required to slow the spread of disease.* As a church, our communal life together makes following these recommendations extremely difficult.

At this time, we do not have a timetable for when we will resume “normal” worship, but please know we are working diligently to find ways for those who feel the need to be in the physical church structure to be able to “come to church.” The consistory, on behalf of the congregation of St. Paul’s, is doing everything possible to both be safe and work toward coming back to church. If you have thoughts on what you would like to see happen, you are encouraged to reach out to your consistory members, Consistory President John Brown, or Pastor Jeremy. Your input will help guide us during this difficult time.

Thank you for all of your help and understanding in these unusual times.

In Christ,

Rev. Jeremy Hylan
John Brown Jr. (Consistory President)