



August 9, 2020

Dear Richfield UMC,

I send you this letter with prayer and thanksgiving for you as our great state of Minnesota prepares to shift from summer into a new fall season. In recent weeks, we have seen a new executive order regarding face coverings in public spaces, school districts and higher education systems weigh their safe learning plans, and the number of COVID-19 cases in our state and nation continue to fluctuate. While the pandemic landscape keeps changing, we can rely on our living God who is with us all!

**As I announced in worship on Sunday, we are extending our suspension of in-person worship and in-person gatherings in the church building for the remainder of 2020 and we will continue forward on an open-ended timeline.** This decision was proposed by your Regathering Taskforce, approved by the elected leaders of your Ad Board, affirmed by our District Superintendent, Rev. Dan Johnson, and informed by your collective response to the regathering survey this summer. Your safety is our most important concern and this decision is in alignment with this missional value.

#### **What did we say in our regathering survey data?**

105 surveys were submitted, and we think more people are represented in total, if we factor in children, couples who took one survey together, etc. Our average worship attendance pre-pandemic was around 125, so this is a representative survey, thank you for your participation! Here are some key data points we used to weigh this decision:

- 57% of you are ages 65+ and 67% of you indicated you or someone in your home are considered in a “high-risk” category for COVID-19. 95% of you have strictly or mostly complied with “stay at home” type orders.
- Before attending in-person worship, 59% of you say you need “stay at home” type orders lifted, and 59% of you also said not until a vaccine or treatment for COVID-19 becomes widely available. 50% of you need to see how it goes with events in public gatherings in similar venues like theaters, concerts, and sporting events. Nearly 10% of you are already comfortable to attend in-person worship.
- 97% of you have felt connected to Richfield UMC in at least one of the ways we are trying to connect beyond worship (small groups, email, pastoral care calls, etc.).
- 93% of those you who have worshiped online or by touch tone phone indicated that worship has met or exceeded your expectations.
- On the survey were many opportunities to leave comments, as well. Collectively, you recognize and appreciate how much the worship team and we as a church have grown in our comfort with technology, you feel connected by pastoral care efforts, are getting clear, consistent communication, and worship content is meaningful as you connect with God. Also, you indicate we still have technology growth to do, you want more opportunities to serve your neighbor, and of course, we miss each other dearly! Thank you for sharing your heart on our church’s situation.

### **How does this decision serve our mission?**

The mission of Richfield United Methodist Church is for all people to be able to live in faith, justice, and joy. To do this in these times, your Regathering Taskforce has five areas of focus: Facilities Readiness, People, Leader, and Staff Readiness, Worship and Ministry Readiness, Groups and Vendor Readiness, and Sustained Online Ministry Readiness. We are working on the following agreed assumptions:

1. People's safety is paramount.
2. Regathering will be compliant with state and local orders at the minimum.
3. We will not regather in-person until we are ready, and it can be a safe experience for as many as possible.
4. We will retain the option to revert to online-only worship and activities at any stage.
5. The building is shut to most uses, but Richfield United Methodist Church never closed! Rather, we are doing and will continue to do new and different things to grow in love of God and neighbor, reach new people, and heal a broken world.

### **What does this decision mean for our next steps forward?**

- Your Regathering Taskforce will revisit the decision this fall and continue to stay informed by our state, national, world, and denominational experts and leaders, the latest data for our church's context, and of course, your valuable voices. Your taskforce will continue to keep you informed whenever there are updates.
- Our journey in the Missional Church Consultation Initiative (MCCI) continues. We will still explore our identity and receive prescriptions for our next life cycle but shift our trajectory from this fall to at least the first half of 2021. We will do this in a way that creatively and safely engages as many people as possible.
- We will offer and seek ways for you to serve God in outreach, stewardship, and care.

### **What are other churches doing about regathering in-person?**

There is no consistent answer as I listen to clergy colleagues across Minnesota and the nation. Some have had what appears to be safe in-person opportunities so far, thanks be to God! I wish this were the overall trend. I hear stories of some churches continuing to gather in-person in ways that sound risky and antithetical to scientific evidence of how COVID-19 spreads and I pray they are not on borrowed time.

I hear stories of how disheartening it is for churches to invest time, energy, and money into making in-person gathering spaces as safe as possible, only for 15 people to feel safe enough to show up in a space usually for 300 and prepared for at least 75. Of churches that start gathering in-person, only to have COVID-19 spikes in their area mean a new lockdown with little warning, creating an unfortunate accordion effect. And yes, I hear of churches who regather and end up with cases of COVID-19. These anecdotal examples range from disheartening to alarming, and while being apart is challenging, doing so may be a holistically healthier path for our bodies, our minds, and our spirits.

We are seeking inspiration from other churches. Meanwhile, some churches have looked to us for inspiration on items like our regathering decision-making process, upgrading worship technology, and developing pastoral care systems. It is a time of great collegiality, experimentation, and prayer as we move forward together.

### What does this decision mean for worship?

- Worship will continue to be online and by touch tone phone on Sundays at 9:30am.
- Special worship services such as a Service of Hope and Healing during the Advent season and Christmas Eve will debut online and by touch tone phone this year.
- We will develop new ways for you, the people, to lead worship by video, such as our montage of people reading The LORD's Prayer we had in worship this spring.
- We will create new opportunities for lay people to get trained in worship leadership.
- We will continue expanding our technology capabilities for greater accessibility.

### What does this decision mean for ministries?

- We are developing new online opportunities to deepen our faith and explore ways to live it out loud. These short-term and/or ongoing opportunities may include virtual small groups, new classes, as well as print, online, and/or video content.
- We are exploring *limited* in-person gatherings which could be done outdoors safely. For example, we are deciding if the Pumpkin Party event where we provide a safe trick-or-treating experience for our neighbors can move back outdoors to its classic Trunk-or-Treat roots. This Advent, we might see if there is a way to do outdoor Christmas carol singing around a bonfire. Whatever we do, safety is the top priority.
- We are listening to you as we develop ways to help you deepen your personal faith and get involved in the life of your church beyond worship.

### What does this decision mean for connecting and growing our community?

- *The Heartline* newsletter will continue as a print and online newsletter that covers 2-4 months at a time. The next issue should arrive in early September and detail worship, outreach, stewardship, and ministry opportunities this fall.
- We will continue a pastoral care system to help you stay connected and feel loved.
- We will grow into a new routine with our electronic communications and absolutely need your help to invite new people to be part of what we are doing as a church.

### What does this decision mean for our church's identity?

- The building is closed, **the church is open!** Again and again, you told us in the survey you want this church to be welcoming to all, caring to all, inclusive to all. That is and will continue to be the case, even if we must find new methods of living out these values. **May God be with us in our mission as a church!**

### How does the church need me to invest in our story moving forward?

- **Pray.** We start everything in prayer and activate from there. Your prayer matters.
- **Learn.** Please learn how to access the technology you need. It's okay to ask for help.
- **Teach.** If you can help others get online and get "tech comfortable," we need you.
- **Invite.** Tell people about your church! **Nothing** will replace **your** personal invitation.
- **Grow.** Your intentional faith development is in your hands. Participating in worship, devotionals, groups, classes, outreach, etc. isn't "for somebody else." It's for you.
- **Give.** Your financial stewardship is crucial for the ministry, outreach, and operations of your church in these times. Thank you for your extravagant generosity.
- **Love.** Reach out to someone. This is no time to leave people in emotional isolation.

**What did we say in the survey we should do to reach new people in pandemic?**

You have great ideas, such as: “Have a way for guests to sign in at worship.” “Have more visibility on the internet.” “Ask ‘What can we do that no other church is doing?’” “Let friends and acquaintances know how meaningful worship is, including both those who live nearby and far away.” “Expand small groups.” “Keep faith in God’s Spirit giving guidance.” **We can do things like this, with each other and God’s help!**

**What did we say in the survey will keep this church strong in pandemic?**

You offered strong thoughts, including: “I appreciate the Called to Care Team.” “Stay in touch with each other.” “Come up with ways to volunteer and serve.” “Offer a variety of ways to keep connected, classes, small groups, Bible study.” “Teach ways to be the hands and feet and voice of Jesus in the community.” “Continue to deliver emotional, spiritual, and community connections. This is what church does better than anything else can.” **We can be strong like this, with each other and God’s help!**

**What did we say in the survey must remain true about our church’s identity?**

You love your church! Here are highlights: “Be an open and welcoming church that accepts all people!” “The multigenerational feel!” “Our care for those who cannot leave their homes and for people in need.” “Friendly and inviting.” “Our beliefs, caring nature, and willingness to serve.” “Strongly stand as a reconciling congregation with strong music and great sermons.” “Maintain our Methodist connections.” “Love of people.” **We can remain true to this identity, with each other and God’s help!**

My friends, I’ve written several letters in this season that say we will proceed a certain way through at least a certain date. In this letter, I specifically write there is no certain date ahead. Our hope is this reduces our cycle of decision fatigue and lessens our anxiety as we enter the rest of 2020. Most of us would prefer to be together, myself included. And yet, most of us know the safety to do so is essential and that it eclipses our preference. The information we need is in the future. And that’s hard. Sadly, the virus doesn’t care if this is hard. But God does, and that gives us hope. We will care for one another - both now, and when we can safely regather in a sustained way.

The final line of our Breakthrough Prayer - which I continue to ask and expect everyone who is part of your church to please pray every day at 8:35 - is this: “May we embrace your (God’s) future, and be your loving church.” We are a resilient church and we love a resilient God! Whatever the future holds, we know God will be there, that Jesus has taught us how to frame our hearts and minds for it, and the Holy Spirit equips us for the journey ahead. I am proud to be your pastor. On behalf of your Regathering Taskforce and the elected leaders of your Ad Board, I thank you for your perseverance with faith, hope, and love. **Thank you, Richfield UMC, God bless you.**

In Christ,

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