St. Stephen’s United Church

“The Mission of St. Stephen’s United Church is to follow Jesus Christ.”

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September 24th, 2020

Dear Friends,

A pastor I follow said some wise words recently. ***“In the absence of certainty, people need clarity.”*** As I have thought about those words, it seems to me that I see them reflected in the work of some of our best leaders right now. And so, as I settle into my new role as your minister, a role that is much different than any of us ever expected it would be, I am going to try to heed these words. We don’t know how things will go in BC or here in our community in the coming months. Much is uncertain. So the leaders of your church and I are going to do our best to provide you with as much clarity as we possibly can, while we make our way through this pandemic together.

I had hoped to bring you this message closer to the beginning of this month, but my Mum’s recent passing delayed things a bit. I thank you all for the kindness you have shown and expressed over these last two weeks and for your patience as I get back to work now.

As the Provincial Health Officer is now allowing churches to gather in groups of less than 50, I suspect many of you may be wondering when and if we might be returning to Sunday morning worship. You may have also heard that church gatherings have many components that are conducive to spreading this virus and so this makes them particularly high-risk activities. Singing is not allowed because of its propensity to spread the virus, mass must be worn and physical distancing must remain in place for the entire time we are together. As well, large fellowship gatherings after the service are not possible. These restrictions would mean that much of what we love about worshipping together will be missing. Finally, we are keenly aware that our church is in the midst of the oldest community in Canada, which makes us the community most vulnerable to far more serious consequences should an outbreak occur here.

During the September meetings, the Resource Management Team and your Board discussed all of these things at length and considered carefully our denominational guidance to proceed with caution. With what we hope and trust is wisdom and discernment of God’s leading, we have decided that we won’t be resuming Sunday morning worship this fall. We will continue to watch for how the cases of Covid spread or are contained in the coming months, and should we feel that the risk is being reduced we will happily revisit this.

We do know that some local churches have reopened. They have sanctuaries that are very large and very open with great ventilation, our building is not that style and so it presents some significant physical constraints for us. With adequate physical distancing, we are only able to seat a maximum of 40 people in our sanctuary at one time. This is only one quarter of the people we would normally see on an average Sunday. This means that whether we gather or not we need to continue to produce our online services each week. Please know that we are committed to doing this so that as many of our church family as possible can join in worship from the safety of their homes.

As you all know we try to let the five core values this congregation discerned together some years ago guide our congregational life. One of those core values is “loving our neighbours as ourselves.” St. Stephen’s you have answered this call well and beautifully over the years and now it is the sense of your Board that we are called to love our neighbours by not gathering in large groups in the way we love to, for now … but not for always.

That’s the not-so-good news friends. But, as with God, that is not the end of the story! While we may not be able to be together right now in all of the ways we have been accustomed to, we can be together in new ways. The people who are weathering this pandemic well are those who are creatively finding ways to continue to engage with life in the midst of the restrictions we must all live with. I believe we can be these people friends, people who get creative and find new ways to worship God and still stay connected with and care for each other in these months.

First, there are some relatively simple things we can all do to feel more connected, both with each other and with God. We can all be intentional about reaching out to each other. Think about who you might normally sit next to when we gather on Sunday mornings and, instead of just missing the chance to say “hello” and have a chat with them, pick up the phone and give them a call. Tell them you miss seeing them each week and ask how they are doing. If you have room in your bubble of six people you might want to go a step further and ask a friend from church to join you to watch worship sometimes. Simon and I have gathered with friends for communion Sundays and it has been really lovely. We were encouraged by each other, we had a good chat about the service and it was just great to worship together.

There are also plans in the works to resume some other parts of our congregational life this fall. Your weekly emailed announcements will have more dates and details as we put things into place, but for now I want you to know about a few things we are working on. The church library is going to reopen one morning a week under some new safety protocols so that you can access all of those wonderful resources to encourage you in your faith. We are also planning small coffee time gatherings for groups of six. You will book ahead if you would like to come, the numbers will be kept small and we will be distanced, but it will be a time to see each other, to catch up and to share the richness of fellowship together.

We will also be holding a fall study on NT Wright’s book “Surprised By Hope.” (Don’t worry you won’t need to read the book if you don’t want to.) It will be a virtual version of our usual congregational studies and will include a video segment of teaching and then breaking into small groups to discuss what we have heard in the video … all from the comfort of your home (no need to drive at night). The theme of this study is hope. It aims to help us to understand the promises of God that give Christians such a solid foundation for the hope we have, a hope our world needs now more than ever.

Finally, we are planning to try some simple chapel services in November. These gatherings will be different than our usual Sunday morning worship and will be more like the special services we have on Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, and during Holy Week. The risks will be far less than a Sunday morning as we will have fewer people in attendance and the service will be shorter in duration. We will find ways to engage with our beloved worshipful music without singing and will spend time in prayer and reflection together.

Again, the details of all of these plans will be in your weekly announcements in the coming weeks so watch closely and don’t hesitate to call or email if you have questions, ideas or feedback that might help us as we make these plans. In the meantime, please keep the Board and Ministry Teams in your prayers as they discern ways we can continue to be the church together in our community as we follow Jesus through this uniquely challenging time.

As always friends,

May God bless you and keep you.

May God’s face shine upon you and be gracious to you

May God look upon you with kindness and grant you peace.

Blessings,

Dianne

Rev. Dianne Collery

Minister

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