

November 17, 2020

Dear GateWay Church Family,

Regarding COVID-19, I was alerted yesterday that our county was moved to the purple tier (widespread risk of coronavirus transmission).

Upon hearing this, I convened our staff and made the decision to close the church office and ask non-essential employees to work from home until further notice. I also decided to spend the next 24 hours researching the implications of what the purple tier means for our worship services.

This communication is intended to share what I have learned and the decisions our elders have made.

I started with a phone call and conversation with an employee of the Santa Cruz County Health Services Department. He confirmed that churches may meet “outdoors with modifications.” Since the word “modifications” is not defined, I asked him where I might find information on what is meant by “modifications.” He referred me to the California Department of Public Health website.

Here I found the COVID-19 Industry Guidance for Places of Worship and Providers of Religious Services and Cultural Ceremonies dated July 29, 2020. I carefully read this 14-page document to review the modifications we are requested to follow. This document has dozens of references to other government publications, so I decided to follow these links.

The most applicable of these links was to the CDC Center for Disease Control and Prevention, updated Oct 29, 2020. An applicable sub-article was found titled, “Considerations for Communities of Faith” (copied below).

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/faith-based.html>

*“CDC offers the following general considerations to help communities of faith discern how best to practice their beliefs while keeping their staff and congregations safe. Millions of Americans embrace worship as an essential part of life. For many faith traditions, gathering together for worship is at the heart of what it means to be a community of faith. But as Americans are now aware, gatherings present a risk for increasing spread of COVID-19 during this Public Health Emergency. **CDC offers these suggestions for faith communities to consider and accept, reject, or modify, consistent with their own faith traditions**, in the course of preparing to reconvene for in-person gatherings while still working to prevent the spread of COVID-19.*

This guidance is not intended to infringe on rights protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution or any other federal law, including the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 (RFRA). The federal government may not prescribe standards for interactions of faith communities in houses of worship, and in accordance with the First Amendment, no faith community should be asked to adopt any mitigation strategies that are more stringent than the mitigation strategies asked of similarly situated entities or activities.

*In addition, we note that while many types of gatherings are important for civic and economic well-being, **religious worship has particularly profound significance to communities and individuals**, including as a right protected by the First Amendment. State and local authorities are reminded to take this vital right into account when establishing their own re-opening plans.”*

I agree with the assessment that worship has particularly profound significance to communities and individuals. Thankfully, our rights to worship are protected by our Constitution as they are not to be infringed upon. For places of worship, the CDC offers suggestions, not mandates or laws. These suggestions are for individual communities of faith to consider and then to accept, reject, or modify in keeping with our own faith traditions.

I have spent considerable time in both research and prayer considering what suggestions to accept, reject or modify. Our faith traditions are applicable as follows:

First of all, the GateWay elders have made it very clear that we will not knowingly break any government law. Since there is no law regarding the gathering of worship participants, we will not be violating any laws to do so.

Second, teaching in the Scriptures compel us to be subject to (under) the governing authorities. (Romans 13:1, "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God." Titus 3:1-2, "Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone.")

Our governing authorities are stating that our right to assemble in worship is protected by the Constitution. We fall under that governmental covering.

We also have the Lord Jesus to come under as well. Hebrews 10:23-25 states, "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." According to God, we must not give up meeting, unless for some reason the government shuts us down, which clearly this cannot happen.

Therefore, meeting together is something we can do, but is it something we should do?

As obedient Christians we are to love others and to care for their well-being. No one wants to put others at risk of harm, illness, or potential death. Discernment is needed and significant data is available for decision making.

The CDC Center for Disease Control and Prevention website, dated Oct 29, 2020, includes an article "Considerations for Events and Gatherings." I have copied it below:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/large-events/considerations-for-events-gatherings.html>

The risk of COVID-19 spreading at events and gatherings increases as follows:

Lowest risk: Virtual-only activities, events, and gatherings.

More risk: Smaller outdoor and in-person gatherings in which individuals from different households remain spaced at least 6 feet apart, wear masks, do not share objects, and come from the same local area (e.g., community, town, city, or county).

Higher risk: Medium-sized in-person gatherings that are adapted to allow individuals to remain spaced at least 6 feet apart and with attendees coming from outside the local area.

Highest risk: Large in-person gatherings where it is difficult for individuals to remain spaced at least 6 feet apart and attendees travel from outside the local area.

Our Sunday adult gatherings are what I would consider to be medium-sized, yet no definition is given for what medium-sized mean. Our worship gatherings for children, teens and adult Bible studies are smaller in-person gatherings. Meeting together does present risk, but is the risk reasonable here at GateWay?

The CDC has identified two groups of people who are at the greatest risk. They include "Older Adults" and "People with Medical Conditions." Again, I am copying the articles directly from the CDC website.

Older Adults <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>

“Among adults, the risk for severe illness from COVID-19 increases with age, with older adults at highest risk. Severe illness means that the person with COVID-19 may require hospitalization, intensive care, or a ventilator to help them breathe, or they may even die. As you get older, your risk for severe illness from COVID-19 increases. For example, people in their 50s are at higher risk for severe illness than people in their 40s. Similarly, people in their 60s or 70s are, in general, at higher risk for severe illness than people in their 50s. The greatest risk for severe illness from COVID-19 is among those aged 85 or older. There are also other factors that can increase your risk for severe illness, such as having underlying medical conditions. By understanding the factors that put you at an increased risk, you can make decisions about what kind of precautions to take in your daily life.”

People with Medical Certain Conditions <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-with-medical-conditions.html>

*“**Adults of any age** with certain underlying medical conditions **ARE at increased risk for severe illness** from the virus that causes COVID-19. Severe illness from COVID-19 is defined as hospitalization, admission to the ICU, intubation or mechanical ventilation, or death. Adults of any age with the following conditions are at increased risk of severe illness from the virus that causes COVID-19:*

- Cancer
- Chronic kidney disease
- COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease)
- Heart conditions, such as heart failure, coronary artery disease, or cardiomyopathies
- Immunocompromised state (weakened immune system) from solid organ transplant
- Obesity (body mass index [BMI] of 30 kg/m² or higher but < 40 kg/m²)
- Severe Obesity (BMI ≥ 40 kg/m²)
- Pregnancy
- Sickle cell disease
- Smoking
- Type 2 diabetes mellitus

*COVID-19 is a new disease. Currently there are limited data and information about the impact of many underlying medical conditions and whether they increase the risk for severe illness from COVID-19. Based on what we know at this time, **adults of any age** with the following conditions **MIGHT BE at an increased risk for severe illness** from the virus that causes COVID-19:*

- Asthma (moderate-to-severe)
- Cerebrovascular disease (affects blood vessels and blood supply to the brain)
- Cystic fibrosis
- Hypertension or high blood pressure
- Immunocompromised state (weakened immune system) from blood or bone marrow transplant, immune deficiencies, HIV, use of corticosteroids, or use of other immune weakening medicines
- Neurologic conditions, such as dementia
- Liver disease
- Overweight (BMI > 25 kg/m², but < 30 kg/m²)
- Pulmonary fibrosis (having damaged or scarred lung tissues)
- Thalassemia (a type of blood disorder)
- Type 1 diabetes mellitus

Local risk is defined by local data, here within Santa Cruz County. Data at www.santacruzhealth.org reports both the hospitalization rates and the demographics of known cases here in our county.

This information is found at

<https://www.santacruzhealth.org/HSAHome/HSADivisions/PublicHealth/CommunicableDiseaseControl/CoronavirusHome.aspx>

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)-Associated Hospitalization

“In general, your risk of getting severely ill from COVID-19 increases as you get older. In fact, 8 out of 10 COVID-19-related deaths reported in the United States have been among adults aged 65 years and older.”

Graphs show that hospitalizations in Santa Cruz County peaked on Oct 28 at 25 people, and have been declining since then. The last data point, Nov 9, reports 8 people hospitalized in Santa Cruz County for Coronavirus.

COVID-19 data dashboard: Geography of known cases among Santa Cruz county residents

- 56% of all cases are in Watsonville
- 20.92 % of all cases are in Santa Cruz
- 2.56 % of all cases are in Scotts Valley

Conclusions and Decisions for GateWay Bible Church

During the pandemic, GateWay has made every effort to keep our people safe. Along with God’s divine protection we are unaware of anyone directly associated with our church who has contracted the coronavirus. We long to keep things that way!

Given our history, the virus’s presence in Scotts Valley, and the reasonable considerations of how to proceed we agree that worship has particularly profound significance to communities and individuals. Our First Amendment Rights allow us to legally gather for worship in the midst of the current health crisis. We can do so without violating any laws against such activity. We do not want to “give up meeting together” as commanded by our Lord in His Word. Therefore, the following conclusions have been reached:

We will continue all current ministries while practicing the following protocols:

1. If you are elderly or a person with medical conditions, we urge you to remain home.
2. If you have COVID-19 symptoms, we request you remain at home and seek medical care.
3. We will offer seating at 25% of capacity, indoors and outdoors.
4. Congregants will have their temperature screened and sent home if temps are above 100°F.
5. Congregants are required to wear masks at all times.
6. Six-foot social distancing is required upon arrival, seating, and fellowship times.
7. We will record your name for future contact reporting if necessary.
8. Coffee and snacks will be served by dedicated people wearing masks and gloves.
9. Hand sanitizers will be present, and congregants are encouraged to use them frequently.
10. Seating surfaces will be sanitized before use.

If you feel the risk of attending church remains above your comfort level, you are invited to remain home and engage in our on-line streaming services. Thank you for taking the time to read this notification and thank you for your understanding and support.

Sincerely,

Fred Hennes, on behalf of the Elder Board