

Ministry Council Meeting Minutes

October 19, 2020 at 6:30pm via Zoom conference call

Special Called Meeting to Discuss Plans to Re-Open for Worship

Attending: Judy Belter (chairperson), Rev. Jason Valendy, Rev. Estee Valendy, Melanie Grice (recording secretary), Lou Tiner, Erik Skaarer, David Gerig, Keith Bierley, Toni Bliss, Ellie Skaarer, Polly Soulsby

Judy called the meeting to order at 6:34pm.

Jason shared a quote from a desert mother, "Those who are great athletes must contend with stronger enemies." Wrestling with big issues is part of Keller UMC's mission at this time. Jason is grateful for the leadership and work of all members of Ministry Council.

Judy reminded the group of the principles used for establishing the overall re-opening plan:

1. Insure safety of staff, worship volunteers, and congregation
2. Develop comprehensive plan and communicate it to the congregation
3. Ensure compliance with state, local, and conference guidelines
4. Be flexible as conditions change
5. Be sensitive to the perspective and expectations of the congregation

She said the team now has a track record of offering perspectives and listening to others. The decisions made have reflected this approach.

In-Person Worship

Estee said that Vine and Branches, confirmation, and 3rd grade Bible presentation have been good practice for allowing small groups into the Sanctuary. The worship staff team and custodial team have learned a lot from these experiences. They now feel ready to re-introduce in-person worship and are presenting a proposal.

Jason shared a document (Appendix A) detailing the proposal. The "When" Team provided feedback for the proposal of re-opening on November 8. All were in favor, with varied levels of caution.

Estee said the proposal is for a hybrid style of worship, with both Livestream and in-person. The times would be changed to 9am and 11am to allow time in between for cleaning. The proposal with details would be sent via paper letter to members of the congregation.

Registration would be required at first to plan capacity. Attendees would find their own seats with assistance from ushers as needed. A few seats would be reserved for those who attend without registering in advance. An email would be sent to those who register, with details on protocols and expectations.

Protocols include:

1. Masks required (has not been an issue at Vine and Branches), will be provided if needed
2. Use covenantal language with regard to COVID symptoms and screening
3. Lots of cleaning
4. Nothing in pew pockets
5. Paper bulletins available, but also QR code for those who prefer no-touch experience

6. No attendance pads
7. Collection boxes rather than passed plates or baskets
8. No Sunday School or Nursery
9. Children stay in pews for Kids' Time
10. Limited doors for entry – only front entrance and porte cochere

Judy opened the floor for feedback.

Erik asked what has changed. The spread for COVID is worse. Is it our tolerance for risk?

Estee said that as the team has been able to practice at opening safely, her own confidence level has changed.

Erik asked why the date of November 8 was chosen.

Jason said the team wanted to avoid All Saints Weekend (November 1), so November 8 was the earliest possible date.

Erik said with the current level of community spread (10% of in-person learners at Keller High are currently quarantined), he questions our ability to keep people safe. Also, since attendance at Vine and Branches has been light, he wonders about the demand.

Estee said she is not sure of the demand. Some have expressed a longing to come back, but are unable to attend on Thursdays.

Erik said that we need to be cautious about succumbing to demand.

Judy asked if the group trusts the protocols.

Erik said he trusts the protocols, but that people will break them.

Lou said the team did not want to waffle back and forth between being open and closing again. Responding to the question of what has changed, he feels confident about how attendees followed the protocols for Vine and Branches. He thinks there is a sizeable group in the congregation who long for in-person worship. The men's breakfast group that he attends decided to offer both Zoom and in-person, and the group self-selected to be about half and half. He feels people can be trusted to follow the rules. Staff members have been wearing masks and respecting space. We have a better understanding now of how to stay safe.

Lou shared Tarrant County statistics, which showed a large spike in July with a smaller spike in October, both after holidays. He is hopeful that this spike will follow the trend of the earlier one with lower levels after the spike. He also said that KUMC plans to provide contact tracing.

Using Vine and Branches as an example, Lou thinks people will adhere to protocols. He has faith in potential attendees and confidence that our cleaning protocols are effective.

Judy shared her grandchildren's experience with the cautious protocols in Keller ISD. Everyone she has heard of has had uneventful quarantines.

Toni said she has attended Vine and Branches. She had a level of anxiety returning for the first time, but feels more comfortable each week. She knows it is possible in-person worship will have to stop again, but that is true for all organizations. The guests she brought from Evergreen were uplifted by the service. She is ready to return and thinks this Sunday with worship outdoors will provide more information on how people will follow the rules.

David said he did an informal poll of his Sunday School class. The majority of the class supported offering in-person worship, but many would not attend themselves. It is important to remember that the yellow light phase continues. We will continue to monitor and make changes as needed, especially as the flu season begins.

Keith said no one thought when this started that we would be closed for this long. In that time, we have learned a lot about how the disease is transmitted. If we wait for complete safety, we will never re-open. He believes we should try to find a way to open. The openings for Building Blocks and Vine and Branches have gone well. There will still be a stay-at-home option, which he and Bernadette will exercise for now.

Keith said it is important to be specific in communications about what to expect. We are no better off statistically as a county that we were months ago, but we do know how to handle it better. We can reduce the risk by following guidelines.

Estee said the communications will provide “permission” to stay home. In the experience of White’s Chapel, the majority of worshippers still attend from home. This is the opposite of her training, learning to welcome everyone to worship. This is a new way of doing things, to encourage those at high risk to stay home.

Keith said offering in-person worship to those who are comfortable provides the best of both worlds.

Judy said that as members, we love and respect one another, and want to keep each other safe.

Keith said we have all seen people in public not acting in a safe manner, but thinks those coming to church will be more likely to comply with protocols.

Judy said the traffic light analogy will help. Remaining in yellow light phase communicates that we are not completely back to normal.

Polly said we have done everything we can to make the situation safe, but that does not mean that anyone needs to go if uncomfortable. She appreciates the efforts of the worship staff to make online worship meaningful. She is not in a rush to get back to worship herself. She realizes that some people think the pandemic is a hoax and that not everyone takes it seriously. She appreciates all the work that has gone into planning.

Melanie said her own family has made decisions based on risk. Her child is currently under quarantine with no symptoms because of potential exposure. Her family decided when her daughter went back to school to cut off in-person contact with older relatives for their safety. She appreciates the concept of choice, being able to return to worship or to have a meaningful experience online.

Ellie was late to the meeting due to marching practice and did not hear the beginning, but she has no objections to offering in-person worship.

Lou asked how we would communicate if we find out that someone who attended has been diagnosed.

Jason said registration will be helpful for contact tracking.

Estee said First Methodist Hurst has a good plan that we can use as an example.

Erik asked how contact tracing would work if we are not going to assign seats. Would we notify everyone who attended, including pastors?

David asked how we would know who attended if some do not register.

Lou said he has been taking a short video at every Vine and Branches service. He can tell from the video where each person sat and who was nearby.

Judy said that since the seating is designed to be 6' apart, no one should have to quarantine due to close exposure.

Jason said White's Chapel has about 10% of their worshippers in person. Hurst has about 25 total people in person. He does not expect a huge turn-out. He is not looking for a perfect plan, just a good enough plan and choices. Isolation and depression are real, just as real as COVID.

Lou spoke about the data from different sources. He said he is relying on the advice from the doctor and the nurse on the "when" team.

Estee said she is OK with a consensus unless the group prefers to vote, and Jason concurred.

Judy said that since consensus did not seem to exist, she called for a vote to proceed with hybrid style worship, with in-person worship to begin November 8 and evaluated each week.

Erik feels we are ignoring the data, which is in an upward trend, if we proceed.

Jason said we are not seeking to start now, but in 2+ weeks, gambling that the trend will go down. The plan requires a lot of preparation and the team needs time.

Erik said he is not comfortable opening if the data stays where it is, and he seeks clarification on what we are voting on.

Judy said we are seeking support for the decision of the "when" team.

Jason said the "when" team looked at more than just data. The team is made up of people with life experiences living in the circumstances. He agrees that the data is not currently positive, but it lags and has been inconsistent. He also acknowledged that he personally has a level of fear about remaining closed – losing members, losing revenue, losing church staff jobs.

Erik noted that things are going well from a financial perspective.

Lou said he respects Erik's position and his willingness to speak to a different point of view.

Judy said she feels the plan was well thought out to offer hybrid worship.

Keith said this is not a decision to open forever. We will continue to monitor the situation and make changes as needed. There will be no stigma attached to anyone, no matter what decision they make for their family regarding how to worship.

Judy asked what Jason and Estee need from this meeting and if a vote was needed.

Jason said he recognizes there are different points of view as there have been all along. He plans to start prep work tomorrow at staff and worship meetings, knowing that circumstances may change. He can report back at next week's scheduled Ministry Council meeting.

Erik said he will support the decision of the body, even if not his preference.

Judy said we had consensus in her opinion. The Ministry Council supports the decision to move forward with in-person worship beginning November 8.

Jason asked the Ministry Council not to share this decision yet until a communication plan is prepared. The minutes will not be posted immediately.

Charge Conference

Jason asked the Ministry Council to review the charge conference documents that were sent via email before next Monday's meeting. The Council will vote on whether to recommend reports to the charge conference. The reports are due to the District Superintendent by November 1.

Erik asked how the budget fits in to the charge conference process, since it is still being prepared.

Jason said only compensation for appointed clergy is approved at this point. If the church later passes a budget that does not support the stated level of compensation for appointed clergy, a special charge conference is called to re-approve.

Jason asked that anyone who has questions contact him in case he needs to research before the next meeting.

Judy said she has not yet received any ideas or numbers for Ministry Council supported initiatives to potentially include in the budget. She asked that those be sent to her before the next meeting if there are any.

Estee thanked everyone for attending the unscheduled meeting, for their time and faithfulness. She closed in prayer at 8:10pm.

Appendix A

“Yellow Light” In Person Worship Return

Proposal for return on November 8, 2020

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1146t-bURJ0-L1KndaT1QekASCZjanxRysU9eu4Ju2bQ/edit?usp=sharing>

Worship Times - 9:00 and 11:00 am

- Both services live-streamed and in-person
- Additional time needed in between services for cleaning and to minimize the number of people congregating in the foyer.
- A letter will be sent to all church members, informing them of the change and explaining procedures for registration and protocols. This letter will highlight that the return is still in the “yellow light phase,” emphasize the availability of Livestream worship and encourage high-risk participants to use great caution.

Registration

- Registration for worship is required as seating in the Sanctuary is limited in order to practice physical distancing.
- Congregants who come to in-person worship will locate their own seat, with the assistance of the ushers. Seats will be designated with yellow numbers and ushers will have a seating map.
 - The capacity for seating is: 49 pods, 248 people (seating on aisles, every other pew)
- A small number of seats will be available for those who do not register.
- Registrants will receive a confirmation email with details and what to expect.

Protocol

In order to offer in-person worship with a priority on the health of our community, the following protocols will be in place while on campus and throughout the worship service:

- Masks must be worn by everyone age 2 and up. Those who cannot wear a mask are invited to continue worshipping safely at home.
- Masks will be provided for those who attend, if needed
- Covenantal language will be used with regard to COVID symptoms and screening. This will be included in the confirmation email.
- Pews in the Sanctuary will be disinfected with fogging machines between services.
 - Restrooms will be open and will be cleaned every hour by the janitorial staff
- Hymnals, Bibles, and pew pocket information have been removed from the pews because they cannot be sanitized without being ruined. Disposable paper bulletins will be distributed by the ushers and QR code options.
- In order to reduce contact, the passing of offering plates or attendance pads has been eliminated. Worshipers are encouraged to check in and give their offering electronically. There will be collection boxes in the back of the Sanctuary for those who wish to give that way.
- Nursery care and children and youth Sunday School will not meet in-person on Sunday mornings for the foreseeable future.
 - Children will not come forward for Kid’s Time. Kids will be engaged in their pews instead.
- Building entry only through the front doors and the porte cache

- The DAC will remain closed; the DAC hallway needs to be roped off
- The FLC will remain closed; Firewall doors to FLC will be closed

“When” Team Feedback

When asked about November 8 resuming in-person worship:

I agree as long as we follow guidelines and safety protocols, I am good with starting back. I encourage that we continue to monitor and document the numbers even after starting back. Thinking ahead, it will benefit us to have a general idea of who is attending when and where they are seated; in case we have an exposure we need that information for contact tracing purposes. - Mickey Shelley

As long as we follow physical distancing, wear a mask, and practice proper hand hygiene, then I'm all for returning early November. I assume we will continue to offer virtual worshiping for those that are not comfortable returning. - Richard Valenta

I agree with all that's been said. I think we need to continue tracking who attends & seating. However, if you keep the 6 ft distance & face coverings you avoid any close contacts that you need to notify. We can't control the distancing before & after the service in the narthex, but I believe we should set expectations for safe practices before & after services in the bulletin & any media information we put out. If we fill safe seats in the sanctuary we could seat more in the narthex. That would be a good problem to have. - Jackie Keebler

With proper protocols in place, I'm okay with offering an in-person worship experience as an option for worship. I think it's important to set expectations, offer meaningful virtual options (hybrid approach) and consider what factors would drive KUMC to scale back the in-person experience (although I don't want to go back and forth, being flexible and adaptable is part of the new “normal”). - Amanda Stansberger

With schools, restaurants, and just about everything else open I think it's time for us to open with warnings for at risk folks. The increase in risk to most of us is minimal at this point because we are already out there doing so many things this will raise the risk ratio very little. - Dr. Mike Smith

Sanctuary seating numbers:

With one camera, regardless of location, we can seat 49 pods up to 248 people. That takes into account only seating people on the aisles and every other row like we have been doing for Vine and Branches. We can seat people in the middle of the off rows as well as/or in the middle of occupied rows. That number could be pretty fluid depending on the number of people already sitting there and the number needing to be seated. Taking an educated guess from looking at the map, I think we could seat an additional 25 pods of 1-4 people. Those spots would be held for those that show up but didn't make reservations.

I measured every row in the Sanctuary and made two calculations. One based on currently suggested 24" of personal space per person and one based on previous suggested 18" of personal space per person. I don't quite take up 24" of butt space in a pew and for me 24" would be snug. Not touching anyone on either side and hands would need to be crossed on lap.

On a calculation of 24" of personal space, our Sanctuary will hold 602 people. On a calculation of 18" of personal space we would jump to 803. For some reason 803 sounds close to the number we were originally told the Sanctuary would hold in pews. So 18" might be what was used to calculate capacity at construction time.

I have all the calculations in a spreadsheet so we can play with the personal space number any time or look at the impact of having rows not available for any reason.