

Dear Byron Center Congregation,

“The LORD reigneth; let the earth rejoice; let the multitude of isles be glad thereof” (Psalm 97:1).

Greetings in the name of our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. In the midst of upheaval and trouble in the earth, he maketh us to lie down in green pastures and leadeth us beside the still waters.

Each day, more news about coronavirus comes to light. Throughout society, many measures are being enacted that are unprecedented in our lifetimes. Our Protestant Reformed Churches are wrestling with how to arrange our worship in these unsettled times. Although not every church in our denomination is making the same decision for the same reasons, information is being shared among officebearers. Our own consistory at Byron Center has been wrestling with these questions too. We believe that the following decisions take the necessary principles into account so that we as a congregation can give an answer from Scripture for our actions. It is possible that not everyone agrees with these decisions and that some members would apply these principles differently. As a consistory, we understand that and encourage you to contact the pastor or the elders about these things. Whether we all would come to these same conclusions or not, the following decisions and grounds of the consistory will at least show the congregation where we are coming from and why we believe this to be a principled position.

At its special meeting of March 21, 2020, the consistory made the following decisions.

A. REGARDING WORSHIP

1. Until further notice, the consistory calls the congregation to worship at the normal times of 9:30am and 5:00pm each Lord’s Day. Those who are sick, those who are susceptible to infection through age or other reasons, and those who have compromised immune systems are encouraged to stay home and use live streaming. Those who are healthy but who are uncomfortable gathering in an assembly at this time are encouraged to stay home and use live streaming. Those who are healthy and desire to come physically to church may come, noting that the precautions the consistory is taking will limit the capacity of our facility. All those who plan to attend worship at church, please inform Elder Tim Block (phone or text: 616-813-6015 email: timblock1970@gmail.com).

Grounds:

- a. The public worship of the congregation is of vital importance for the spiritual health of Christ’s flock. Through the lively preaching of the gospel, the sheep hear their Shepherd’s voice (John 10:27) and feed on him through faith (John 6:35). Especially during times of turmoil, the sheep need to be led in the green pastures of the gospel so that they may lie down by the still waters in Christ’s peace (Psalm 23).
- b. The elders are charged by the Chief Shepherd to “watch for your souls, as they that must give account” (Heb. 13:17). In watching for our souls, they are to feed the flock of God which is among them (I Peter 5:2), which food is the lively preaching of Jesus Christ. In obedience to that calling, and to provide the congregation’s souls with our necessary nourishment, the consistory issues this call to worship.
- c. God calls us to public worship each Lord’s Day through the fourth commandment: “Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy.” We keep the sabbath by assembling for corporate worship: “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day

approaching” (Hebrews 10:25). God in his providence sometimes makes it impossible for the church to assemble, but the church strives to assemble as long as there remains opportunity.

- d. God’s people are called not to kill our neighbor (sixth commandment) and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:39). We may not willfully expose ourselves to danger (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 40, QA 105) and we must also prevent our neighbor’s hurt as much as in us lies (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 40, QA 107). This means that our assembling for worship must not be done in a reckless disregard for our physical health or for that of the neighbor in our broader communities. Therefore, those who are sick, aged, prone to sickness, or uncomfortable in an assembly at this time are encouraged to stay home and worship by live streaming the services. The consistory is also making special requests of those who do assemble in item 2 below.
 - e. The current Executive Order 2020-11 limits assemblages to 50 people or less. Nevertheless, the consistory judges that Byron Center PRC is free before God to meet with our full congregation for worship during the entire period of this executive order. Our disobeying the executive order is not rebellion or insubordination to the state, but simply a recognition that the state has required something contrary to the Word of God in this instance. We heartily confess that the state has real, God-given authority over the lives of its citizens (Rom. 13:1). We willingly and cheerfully submit to the state in all things and obey it in all lawful things (Belgic Confession, Article 36). However, the state has no authority over the worship of God’s church, and therefore we must obey God rather than man in this instance (Acts 5:29). Rev. Lanning will be sending out a separate paper explaining these principles more fully. It is significant to note that the government itself feels its limitation in the matter of restricting worship, for Executive Order 2020-11 carries no penalty for churches. From the State of Michigan website: “A place of religious worship is not subject to penalty under section 3 of Executive Order 2020-11.” https://www.michigan.gov/coronavirus/0,9753,7-406-98178_98455-522357--,00
2. The consistory requests that those who physically come to the church building for worship services observe the following practices. These requests are made in love for our neighbors in our broader communities and follow many of the recommendations of the health agencies in an attempt to prevent the spread of this virus, especially among the vulnerable in our local population.
 - a. Please refrain from shaking hands. Consistory members will greet the congregation at the doors as usual, but will refrain from shaking hands.
 - b. Please wash your hands thoroughly before coming to church and after arriving home.
 - c. Please cough or sneeze into the crook of your elbow and not into your hand. If you have a persistent cough or sneeze, you are encouraged to stay home and live stream.
 - d. Extra cleaning and disinfecting of the church premises is being performed by our janitors. If anyone is willing to assist in this additional wiping down of surfaces, please contact Jason or Jodi Gunnink.
 - e. Please sit every other row in the sanctuary and only in the chairs set up behind the glass and in the fellowship hall.
 - f. No nursery will be provided.
 - g. Please exit the building at the conclusion of the worship services. We can still fellowship outside after church, but please do not remain in the building.
 - h. **Please bring your own Bibles and Psalters to church** as none will be provided in the sanctuary or in the other seating areas.
 3. If anyone needs assistance setting up for live streaming in your home, please contact the

deacons.

4. The deacons will be updating the congregation with information regarding offerings soon.
5. The confessions of faith of Lilly Engelsma, Emily Kaptein, and Paige Lubbers are postponed to a date to be determined.

B. REGARDING CATECHISM

The final week of catechism for the doctrine classes will meet at the normal times on Monday, March 23. If any parents prefer not to have their young people attend, they are given permission to keep them home. Please inform Rev. Lanning if your young people will not be attending so that he can email the class notes for use at home.

C. REGARDING BIBLE STUDIES

All Bible studies held at church are concluded for the remainder of the season.

The consistory would like to highlight a couple of things. First, we recognize that these are unusual times, and that many people will not be able to come to worship or will not be comfortable in an assembly at this time. The consistory assures these members that our call to worship does not bind your conscience in this matter. Just as God's people use the wisdom from above every week to determine if it is possible for them to attend worship, so you may exercise that wisdom in these days.

Second, the consistory encourages those who are sick, those who know they have been exposed to COVID-19, those who are aged, prone to sickness, or uncomfortable in an assembly at this time to stay home and worship by live streaming the services.

We pray that God will use these decisions for the spiritual welfare of our congregation. We also pray for God's blessing on each of you in these circumstances. Please do not hesitate to contact us for any reason during this time. The pastor, elders, and deacons are available to assist you.

"Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness" (Isaiah 41:10).

In Christ's love,
The Consistory of Byron Center PRC