

Hey Everyone,

I'm following up on the recent survey data we've collected, as well as the location-specific Town Hall meetings we've conducted over the past couple of weeks in order to digest and process the survey information. I'm so grateful to all of you who participated—both in the survey itself (we had 447 online surveys completed, up from 407 in the summer) and in the discussions that followed.

As a leadership, what we've heard more than anything, not surprisingly, is that there are divergent needs in our community—as well as differing opinions about how to navigate COVID-19. As we discussed in the Town Hall meetings, some of us lean towards a “do as much as we can, operating within the restrictions” approach while others bias towards “do as little as possible to prevent virus spread and protect the most vulnerable”. For sure, navigating the pandemic is requiring another gear of Love Beyond Belief in our hearts to embrace the reality that spiritual family means actively choosing to cultivate unity amidst diversity rather than insisting everyone think exactly like we personally do.

As we continue to nurture that culture, though, our leadership also has to make some practical decisions for this next ministry season. And in this next season, we're going to seek to address *both kinds of needs* that are represented in your feedback.

On the one hand, we're going to continue to bias with the most common perspective in our community and limit gatherings as much as possible through the winter months in order to minimize spread.

**This means that our weekend services will remain online through the winter months.** Remember, after all, that our church doesn't exist to fill rooms; it exists to fill the world with the life and presence of Jesus. As a leadership, we believe we serve our community best in this pandemic by coming alongside them, and—in the spirit of Jesus—sacrificing what we could or would prefer to do in order to contribute to keeping people safe, especially those most vulnerable.

At the same time, we've sensed—and heard through the Town Hall meetings—that there's another growing group of vulnerable people: those increasingly struggling within the restrictions and lockdowns. So, while seeking to continue to live out the spirit of the encouragement to “limit all non-essential social interactions”, we're going to try to address this need within our community this winter as well.

**Beginning on January 10, we're going to offer a pastorally-supported in-person experience of the online service.** On Sundays at 10:00am at our Vineland Location (at least to start), people (from any of our locations) for whom connecting with others is becoming essential to our mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being can gather together to experience the online service and be supported through after-service conversation and prayer by our team of Location Pastors.

To be clear: this doesn't mean we've "re-opened" public in-person gatherings. We're still encouraging as many who can to stay home if possible in order to contribute to protecting our society. While doing this, though, we want to create an experience—especially during these difficult winter months—for those for whom experiencing the online service with others is becoming essential. Each week, we'll continue to monitor the effectiveness of this initiative and make adjustments as necessary. For now, this is a January experiment to see if it helps meet the need a growing number of people are feeling.

It's our hope that, especially as the arrival of a vaccine gains promise, we can be preparing to re-engage in large-group in-person worship gatherings in the spring. To a person across our leadership, we are sensitive to the sacrifice it will continue to be on all of us to predominantly maintain our spiritual and relational connection from home. We've always described the online experience as an "Option-B", eager to once again reconnect with our church family—together, seeing friends, exchanging hugs, enjoying coffee, engaging kids, etc. We hope to get there soon and, in the meantime, we hope you'll continue to join us as a church family in making that personal and collective sacrifice together.

We really appreciate your engagement in this discernment process, and invite your comments and feedback to continue the dialogue. We love you and we're proud of you for how you're handling the stresses and challenges of the pandemic. And we hope we'll continue to grow in what it means to be a unified diverse community who's oriented toward serving our surrounding society.

It may not be the easiest way, nor the preferred way, but as a leadership, at least within our context, we believe it represents the Jesus Way and are grateful that you're continuing to track with us as we pursue His Way to a greater degree.

Cheers,

Jeff