

Dear People of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church,

Good news! There will be no social media in heaven! How do I know? Because John writes, "We know that when Christ appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2). Now, I readily admit that there is doubtless a value to each of these modern means of communication, as many of us have learned during the current COVID-19 Lockdown. Let me be the first to acknowledge that I miss being in worship corporately with God's people each Lord's Day and I don't think I am alone in that. There simply is no substitute for the fellowship of believers and the hearty singing of Zion's songs in an ARP congregation. It is the nearest thing on earth to singing around the throne. We, of course, have a long history of being the psalm singers among God's people. But, my reason for writing now is far bigger than even that.

Making no claims to have the last word on the COVID-19, yet having studied this matter extensively for some weeks now, I write now as your Moderator to encourage you to get back into public worship in every imaginable form. I have tried very hard not to get sidetracked by the politics and pseudo-science of the moment. I hear what some people say and I remember again the Ninth Commandment. Dear friends, be careful what you say about this matter. In the face of this, and in short, I write to say, "Let's do it all!" By that, I mean let's worship in our sanctuaries and churches while taking every necessary caution as well as by Livestream, Facebook, or YouTube next Sunday if at all possible. I have several reasons for encouraging this. Here they are:

Before writing these words, I have sought counsel from literally dozens of people; experts in medicine, especially communicable disease physicians, music, and pastors. I have joined in ZOOM meetings with multiple groups. The opinions I have heard have not all been the same but the time has come to look more seriously at where we are as a church, especially as it relates to public worship.

First, I see nowhere in Scripture and no example in the history of the Church that allows God's people to cease their public worship. I simply don't and I do not believe any of you can show me where I am wrong. To the contrary, the Hebrew's writer tells us to, "Not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:25). And, if it's the Coronavirus that has you frightened, I would remind you that God promises us, "No evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent" (Psalm 91:10-11). Moreover, Scripture also assures us that, "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14). Are you afraid of what might happen if you attend public worship? Then I remind you that the Bible also tells us that, "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Timothy 1:7). Scripture teaches us that as God's people we are to act on faith, not feelings and certainly not fear. We are cautioned to seek the counsel of many people: "In an abundance of counselors there is safety" (Proverbs 11:14). "By wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counselors there is victory" (Proverbs 24:6). There is, I believe, a growing sense that we are now in an era where fear is building on fear. **We are not the people of fear, but of faith.** My point is simply that Scripture nowhere excuses God's people from public worship. Indeed, they tell us that there is nothing that we as Christians are called to do that has a higher priority. I understand the Bible to say that worship is the only practice on earth that carries over into heaven. To our eternal peril, we would dismiss it lightly!

Second, I remember our history and heritage as Christians. First in Jerusalem, then in Rome, later in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and more recently, behind the Iron Curtain. In each place, Christians, including Reformed Presbyterians, were prohibited from offering worship to God in a way that was Scriptural and honoring to the Lord Jesus. Whether in houses, catacombs, or under cover of darkness, God's people gathered publicly to honor and praise their Maker and Savior. A few years ago, I was led through a series of tunnels deep below St. Petersburg, Russia, to preach at an underground worship

gathering. I will never forget the rousing praise of the singing of those saints. In Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia, I had the distinct honor and privilege of meeting in secret places with pastors whose governments prohibited their public gatherings for worship. Some of the pastors I met there bore the scars of beatings they had endured in prison for worshipping. Beatings and imprisonment couldn't stop them. I saw their wounds and heard their testimony that after being beaten and imprisoned, they resumed public worship. Some told me that they believe that Communism was brought low by the Church's unstoppable commitment to worshipping together. I witnessed there firsthand that when Christians are serious about their faith nothing will prevent them from gathering in worship. They were people of faith not fear! Mindful that our Form of Government assigns responsibility for public worship exclusively to sessions (see FoG 6.8L), I charge our sessions to prove that we are as serious as they. Our Westminster Shorter Catechism sets out well the first priority for which each of us was born: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." Let's do it together this week!

Third, as an adopted American, I remember the marvelous statement a federal judge charged me to memorize when I became a citizen: "Congress shall make no law respecting an **establishment of religion**, or **prohibiting the free exercise thereof**; or abridging the **freedom of speech**, or of the press; or the **right of the people peaceably to assemble**, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

That judge did not embolden those words, I did, so that I might make a point to you. You can see, can you not, that this First Amendment to our Constitution forbids our government from restricting our individual religious practices, guarantees our freedom of expression and the right of citizens to assemble peaceably? I like to say that these phrases might as well say, "ARPs, worship!" because that is precisely what they protect and defend for you and me. Dr. Howard Cromie in his book, *Ulster Settlers in America*, makes the point that because it was initiated by our forebears who opposed the efforts of some who suggested an official national religion in the settling of our country, this First Amendment was initially colloquially called, "the Ulster Scots Presbyterian Amendment." That being the case, we ARPs, by virtue of our heritage, have an unique connection to it. I do not write these words to make trouble but to remind us all that no power of government can stop devotees of Christ or of any other religion from practicing their faith in their respective places of worship. This is a freedom for which people gave their lives and their fortunes and their sacred honor. May we never take it lightly!

Fourth, I write to you out of a pastor's heart. My special concern just now is for those dear people, particularly our widowed church members and others who, for a variety of reasons, live alone. For many of these Christians, attending church is their only opportunity to gather with other people. We have a collective responsibility towards them at such a time as this and they have a right to expect that we will meet it. Just a few days ago, the Wall Street Journal (see Wall Street Journal, May 25, 2020) featured an article about the huge increase in the use of anxiety and insomnia medications and the vast increase in numbers of people abusing alcohol because of the Coronavirus Lockdown. I was immediately burdened also for those people, some of whom are members of our congregations. We need to meet for worship to encourage them as Scripture instructs us. They need us. We need one another! Others are reporting an increasing number of people who are committing suicide because the Coronavirus Lockdown has brought them to their wit's end. The Church of Jesus Christ can help counter these trends through encouraging people to come worship and fellowship together.

The issue in our current circumstance is sometimes one of time and space. As I have traveled throughout our ARP Church this year as Moderator, I have seen again and again that most congregations have sufficient facilities for multiple worship settings. We can gather in many different settings at one time in our church buildings. Some will want to socially distance while others will want to exercise their right to fellowship more closely together. Some will prefer to wear masks, while others will choose not to. Some might even prefer to be in a separate room. God has given us buildings and electronics that can facilitate all these things and still gather in our churches. That is why I say that we should do whatever we must do and by all means exercise every reasonable caution we feel we must to make church worship

accessible to all our people this Lord's Day. Let's do it all and be bold for Jesus!

Yours in the Love of Him Who Died for us All,

Leslie Holmes
Moderator