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Greetings Everyone

It's been a while since I've written to all of you this way and I have a number of thoughts, considerations and plans that I'd like to share with all of you. That said I need to be upfront that all of this is – "If the Lord wills..." If all the surprises of the last 6 weeks (or so) have taught us anything it is that we don't know the future. We are not in control, we're not the author of our own destinies. What I just said is true no matter how hard we try to convince ourselves that we are – we are not in control, God is always in control.

As a church family we are prayerfully walking through these unusual circumstances together learning to trust the Lord (who is in complete control) in deeper and fuller ways. Together we're putting one foot in front of another and in everything we're trusting the Lord. I've shared this passage before and I'd like to share it again this is James 4:13-16 (NIV) and we're living it – "Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil."

So with that said I have some exciting – "If the Lord wills..." plans that I'd like to share with all of you. Many of you are aware that on Monday our Governor of Iowa changed a number of restrictions and part of the changes was the lifting of restrictions on 'religious gatherings' of more than 10 people. This change allows 'religious gatherings' of more than 10 people provided such gatherings follow certain (and honestly pretty specific) guidelines put out by the Iowa Department of Public Health. With this announcement churches (and restaurants and some other businesses too) started having discussions on what it looks like to start meeting again (re-opening) for worship during this time of pandemic. I know I personally talked with a number of you and I'm so thankful to those of you who have shared your thoughts, feedback and professional medical experience. On Tuesday the elder team met and prayerfully discussed what our first steps might look like here at Arthur E-Free Church. And I want you to know that we prayed and discussed. No question about it – there's a lot here to consider.

Coming out of our meeting we have a – "If the Lord wills..." plan forward for the next several weeks. We will be continuing to meet online only as we have over the past 6 weeks for this Sunday (May 3). **That's online only this Sunday, May 3.** Then for Mother's Day (that's Sunday, May 10) we're planning to invite those who want to attend to an outdoor worship service (obviously that is weather dependent). We plan to meet in the grassy lot behind the church building that belongs to the church for a special time of worship together – the reason for choosing to meet outdoors is that we can worship together (something that is long-overdue) while at the same time keeping the environment as safe as possible and maintaining the 'social distancing' that is still required by the Iowa Department of Public Health. Experts tell us that 'social distancing' in an outside environment with fresh air and the UV from sunlight will significantly limit the risk of virus transmission.

That said if you are uncomfortable coming for any reason we're planning to continue to post the messages on Facebook and YouTube as we have been over the past 6 weeks. And please remember that if you are in one of the higher risk categories, please make your own informed decision. And I (Pastor Dave, speaking) would encourage you to please heed the advice of medical professionals and stay home as much as possible. Also if you are sick please stay home! We've all heard these messages but I just want to remind us of them, they are important. We really do want to re-open and we want to do it as safely as possible.

That said here are some specifics – I'll share these again later and their might be some minor adjustments to the plan because we're still working on the details (one of the reasons for waiting a week to begin) but here's what we have in mind:

1. The service is scheduled for 11 AM but we are open to tweaking the time if a slight time adjustment means that the weather will be significantly more desirable.
2. We are going to seek to keep this worship service short (roughly 45-50 minutes) and we're going to keep the building closed. So we kindly ask everyone to please use the restroom before you come.
3. Those who would like to drive up and remain in their cars are welcome to do so and we are working on having the capability of listening to the music and message over your cars radio. A short-range AM radio transmitter is on order – hopefully it ships on-time. We'll see, remember – "If the Lord wills..."

4. Those who would like to sit outside are welcome and encouraged to do that – please bring your own chairs or blankets (this way we are not required to sanitize the seating). Please understand that (and I know this is hard) we must insist that we sit only with those who live at your address that that we all maintain social distancing (easier to do outside).
5. We also realize that at this point the restrictions have only been lifted for ‘religious gatherings’. All other social gatherings remain limited to groups of 10 or less so we need to ask that out of respect for these regulations that we leave promptly after the service and don’t allow our worship service to turn into a long overdue fellowship / friendship gathering. We all long for that day and it will come – it’s just not here yet.

Wow that seems like a lot – thanks again for being a flexible this is has been quite an interesting season for all of us. Please be praying for our church and or us as an elder team as we continue to seek to walk this journey of faith in an unusual time following the Lord ‘one step at a time’. If you have any feedback or thoughts please reach out.

Joyfully!

Pastor Dave

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

--Romans 15:13, NIV