

# A PROCESS FOR NAVIGATING THE CONVERSATION OF REOPENING CHURCH BUILDINGS DURING COVID-19

The Albany Synod Mediation Team offers this process to be used as a tool to help leaders in churches navigate conversations about gathering in person for worship and other meetings, during this time of the coronavirus pandemic.

Feel free to adapt this process so that it better fits your context. This process is designed to help set the stage for a thoughtful, respectful conversation where all voices can be heard and all values are included. It doesn't provide easy answers; rather, it is intended to support values-driven, collaborative decision-making.

**This is a new conversation. We have never before walked these paths in our lifetimes! We recognize that no tool is one size fits all.**

**1.**

Open with prayer, asking for God's guidance during your time together. You might use the reflection on Psalm 62 entitled "In God Alone" found at the end of this guide to guide your time of prayer:

**2.**

Ask someone to take notes on a big piece of paper/ white board that everyone can see, or if over zoom, in the Chat window so everyone can see.

**3.**

Invite everyone to take a deep breath. Quietly check in with how you are feeling. Are you feeling worried, scared, sad, grieving, perhaps angry? Peaceful, excited, calm? Perhaps you are feeling more than one thing at once. What physical sensations are your body feeling?.

**4.**

Ask everyone to share how they are feeling by asking this question: On a scale of 1-10, how anxious (or worried) are you about opening the church building once again? Invite everyone to share just their number. This will allow everyone to share how they are feeling coming into this conversation.

## 5.

### Create a Statement of Values.

*It's important that all decisions be grounded in the church's values. This is not a time to make quick anxiety-fueled decisions, or to give in to bullying. It can feel like there is a lot at stake, no matter where someone falls on the worried scale.*

### 5a.

Invite people gathered to spend time in solitude (about 10-15 minutes) with the Potential Values List provided in this document. Ask them to consider this question, If you could only value one or two things about gathering in the building after a global pandemic what would you choose? In your solitude, give particular attention to what you value about being physically or virtually present with others, about being in worship, and about making music together. Don't feel limited by the values on the Potential Values List--you may choose additional words that the Spirit may be speaking to you.

*Invite everyone to share their word(s). Write them on the board/in chat, or invite everyone to write down the words that they hear on their own piece of paper.*

## Ask

WHAT DO THE WORDS HAVE IN COMMON.

WHAT DON'T THEY HAVE IN COMMON?

WHAT DO YOU NOTICE?

DO ANY OF THE VALUES CONTRADICT?

WHICH WORDS SHOWED UP OVER AND OVER AGAIN

WHAT DO THOSE WORDS MEAN TO THE PEOPLE WHO SHARED THEM.

## WRITE A STATEMENT OF VALUES

(that incorporates all the values the best you can)

### HERE ARE SOME EXAMPLES.

- We value providing a safe and inclusive place to gather to worship God together.
- We value coming together to worship God with our whole church family.
- We value being together.
- We value being free of restrictions on our gathering and safety.

Agree together that the statement you created will be your guiding line as you make decisions about re-gathering for worship and other meetings.

WHEN YOU ARE MAKING A DECISION ASK YOURSELVES THIS QUESTION:

Does this line up with our Statement of Values?

# NOW YOU ARE READY TO MOVE ON TO THE STEPS OF PLANNING.

1.

## Gather Information.

Once everyone has had a chance to be heard and name what is important to them, your team can look at the facts:

What is mandatory? What are the recommendations of the state and of the CDC? What is the Classis and Regional Synod saying?

2.

## Make a Plan.

Create a plan that will work in your context. How will it be communicated? Who will enforce it? What happens if someone doesn't "follow the rules" you establish? What happens if a staff person or attendee of your church is diagnosed with Covid-19? How will the plan be changed if circumstances change?

3.

## Check-in with your Value Statement.

Does our plan line up with our Statement of Values?

For example: If we value being together without restrictions, and face masks will be recommended until a vaccine is readily available, what are the next steps? How does our plan reflect or not reflect our values?

## LIST OF POTENTIAL VALUES

Adaptability	Quality	
Calmness	Creativity	
Consideration	Touch	Freedom
Harmony	Trust	Diversity
Decisiveness	Variety	Authenticity
Dependability	Reliability	Joy
Inclusivity	Simplicity	Togetherness
Integrity	Service	Learning
Open-Mindedness	Wisdom	
Organization	Hospitality	
Participation	Impactfulness	
Patience	Innovation	

**'IN GOD ALONE' A REFLECTION ON PSALM 62  
IN RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC  
BY REV. DR. JACKIE SMALLBONES**

Prepare to listen. Light your candle of hope and wait in silence for God alone.

## PRAYERFULLY READ PSALM 62

*1 For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation.*

*2 He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken.*

*3 How long will you assail a person, will you batter your victim, all of you, as you would a leaning wall, a tottering fence?*

*4 Their only plan is to bring down a person of prominence. They take pleasure in falsehood; they bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse.*

*5 For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.*

*6 He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.*

*7 On God rests my deliverance and my honour; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.*

*8 Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.*

*9 Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath.*

*10 Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.*

*11 Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God,*

*12 and steadfast love belongs to you, O LORD. For you repay to all according to their work.*

## PRAYERFULLY WONDER

COVID-19 has put all of us into an uncomfortable space, to put it gently. Perhaps this is the greatest good that has come from this pandemic and its fall-out. It has rearranged our lives and woken us up. Nobody likes it when the norm is messed with, yet uncomfortable spaces are good for us and therefore necessary. They force us to pause, give us space for reflection to name harmful habits and discern new ways of being. We've been given a gift from God and can choose it to seek creative living in the Spirit and reject 'the same old same old.' The psalmist in today's lament has found himself in an uncomfortable space but chose to use it to wait in silence for God alone. We don't know what the unsettling circumstances were and thus we can read our own situation into this psalm. As political leaders begin easing restrictions the discomfort doesn't vanish. We continue to live with anxiety and uncertainty about life after COVID-19. Wait in silence for God alone, advocates the psalmist, reminding us to build our hope in God who is, as he twice proclaims, 'my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken.' As the psalmist waited in silence, he gained a new perspective and observed a great truth: God treats all people, those of high estate and those of low estate, alike. He could admit that he, along with everyone else, is 'but a breath,' 'a delusion,' 'together lighter than a breath.' His circumstances hadn't changed. His perspective had, therefore he could urge his fellow pray-ers to wait in silence and, as they did, to trust in God pouring out their hearts to God, who is their refuge.

## PRAYERFULLY REFLECT

What lessons has the current situation taught you? How has your perspective on life been changing? During the day, periodically press the pause button for 30-60 seconds (or longer) and wait in silence for God alone.

## RESPOND TO JESUS

For you alone, O Lord, my soul in silence waits, and waits. May I use this waiting time to shed the past, let go of grudges, bad habits, activities that, while good kept me too busy for you. May I find new and creative ways to live as I sit in silence and wait for God alone. Amen.