

Communication to the Congregation  
Regarding Gov. Wolf's Order

Dear Congregation,

As many of you may be away, Gov. Wolf, yesterday, issued new Covid-19 mitigation orders. The new, limited-time mitigation orders take effect at 12:01 a.m. on December 12, and remain in effect until 8 a.m. on January 4, 2021.

According to Gov. Wolf, "With these measures in place, we hope to accomplish three goals: First, stop the devastating spread of COVID-19 in the commonwealth. Second, keep our hospitals and health care workers from becoming overwhelmed. And third, help Pennsylvanians get through the holiday season – and closer to a widely available vaccine – as safely as possible. This is a bridge to a better future in Pennsylvania."

In the orders given by the Governor, restrictions have been placed on restaurants, schools, gyms, retail businesses, and entertainment venues, as well as indoor and outdoor public and private gatherings. This is a comprehensive order which affects all of us and our community in some way.

One of the specifics of these orders which relates to us as a church is the restriction that has been put in place for indoor gatherings and events. The Order reads as follows:

**Indoor Gatherings and Events**

- Indoor gatherings and events of more than 10 persons are prohibited.
- Churches, synagogues, temples, mosques and other places of congregational worship are specifically excluded from the limitations set forth above during religious services. These institutions are strongly encouraged to enforce physical distancing and other mitigation measures at their gatherings.
- Conventions, retreats, and other gatherings that may be sponsored or held by these religious entities that are not the actual worship service are required to comply with this Order.

The Governor further communicates that "these institutions are strongly encouraged to find alternative methods for worship, as in person gatherings pose a significant risk to participants at this time. While this an incredibly difficult recommendation to make, particularly at this time of year, faith leaders must carefully weigh the health risks to their congregants given the immense amount of community spread of COVID-19."

As can be seen in the Order, Church worship services are specifically exempt from this Order. This is because Gov. Wolf recognizes that the state has no authority over the church in this regard. What can also be seen is that, even though we as a church are exempt from this Order, we are strongly encouraged to comply.

Last night, your Session met to discuss our response to this Order and the encouragement from the Governor. During our discussion we reviewed the Order, as well as an important section of our Reformed Presbyterian Testimony. In doing so, we concluded that we should follow the encouragement of the Governor by adhering to the Order as if it applied to us as the church, and therefore we will be holding On-line morning and evening services only for the duration of this particular Order.

In Chapter 23, paragraph 19 our Testimony says this:

Both the government of the nation and the government of the visible church are established by God. Though distinct and independent of each other, they both owe supreme allegiance to Jesus Christ. The governments of church and state differ in sphere of authority in that due submission to the government of the visible church is the obligation of members thereof, while due submission to civil government is the obligation of all men. The governments of church and state also have different functions and prerogatives in the advancement of the Kingdom of God. The means of enforcement of the civil government are physical, while those of church government are not. Neither government has the right to invade or assume the authority of the other. They should cooperate to the honor and glory of God, while maintaining their separate jurisdictions. Rom. 13:1; Matt. 22:21; Col. 1:18; Acts 15:10; Ezra 7:10, 25-26; 2 Chron. 26: 18-19; Matt. 5:25; 1 Cor. 5:12-13.

There are two very important points from our Testimony that should inform our thinking about church and state in general, and informed the Session's discussion regarding the Order and the encouragement in particular. These points are found in the last two sentences:

- 1) "Neither government [church or state] has the right to invade or assume the authority of the other."
- 2) "They should cooperate to the honor and glory of God, while maintaining their separate jurisdictions."

In moving to On-line services only, we as a Session want to affirm that:

- We believe that Church and State are separate institutions, and that the Governor has no authority over the church;
- We do not believe that this Order or the Governor's strong encouragement is an attack on our freedom to worship or an attack upon our Christian Faith in general;
- We are not submitting the worship or government of the church to the Governor, but are choosing, out of respect for our civil leaders and love for our neighbor, to walk in accord with this Order, thereby cooperating with the civil government to the honor and glory of God.

We understand that this decision may come as a disappointment and a frustration to you. We understand how it may seem like a step backwards. However, this is a struggle that we all, in God's providence, must endure. We have the opportunity to not only walk in accord with our civil authorities, but stand with those in the neighborhood around us as they find themselves under the same restrictions.

There are more and more people in our community and even our church who are testing positive for Covid-19. There are more and more people in our community and people known to our church who have suffered intensely with this virus, some having even died. We want to love our God in loving our neighbor by doing what we can to mitigate the current increased spread of this virus. We want to bring glory to Jesus in being a good witness to our community by following the same mitigation measures as everyone else, so that it does not appear to them that the church of Jesus Christ is working against our community, but is actually for it.

Please be in prayer to the Great King and Head of the Church, that He would bring a swift end to this pandemic, and that as we wait, He would grant patience, perseverance, humility, peace, and protection to His people and our community, and that ultimately the honor and glory of God would increase.

Grace and peace,

The Hope Community RPC Session