



LIVING WATERS ANGLICAN FELLOWSHIP

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Friday, September 20, 2012

Brothers & Sisters,

It's hard to believe that September is here—the summer seemed to fly by so quickly! I hope that this letter finds you well and rested. It's customary this time of year for me to write a pastoral letter to welcome people back from summer holidays and to outline our worship and programs for the fall. However, this is not easy to do this year with COVID-19 still looming and social distancing protocols still in effect. I was hoping that by September we would be back to some semblance of normalcy, and I could share with you a vision for ministry for the coming months. Sadly, it has become clear to me that instead of launching our ministry full force, we will have to be content with taking it one step at a time. Although we have no idea what the next few months will hold for us as far as the pandemic is concerned, I do know that as long as we are able, we will continue to meet in person for worship and children's church on Sunday mornings. Physically coming together for worship and fellowship is not only crucial for our spiritual health and well-being, it's a biblical mandate. As we read in Hebrews 10:24-25;

“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, *not neglecting to meet together*, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

While I am thankful for technology and the online means of being together during lockdown, it can never replace our God-given imperative to gather as the Body of Christ. And as convenient as online worship can be (you can watch from the comfort of your own living room in your pjs!) it can never satisfy, nor diminish, our need to be together face-to-face. Of course, there are some people, who because of health concerns, will need to stay at home and continue to join church online. And I fully understand and support this—we all need to do what we feel comfortable doing. However, my concern is that there are some people who may simply prefer the convenience of online worship over meeting face-to-face. Although I understand this as well, it is definitely not ideal! To help explain what I mean by this, I want to summarize an article from *9Marks.org* that I read recently that outlines 15 reflections on what is lost when we **choose** to worship from the couch instead of the “pew”—when we don't physically come together for worship.

1. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said in his book, *Life Together*, “The physical presence of other believers is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.” The mere presence of other Christians has a fortifying effect on our souls, beyond what we're even able to consciously recognize. We are Christ's very body, organically connected to each other, the life and strength of Christ Himself flowing into us through one another.

2. A virtual worship gathering is one-way participation, not two-way. You're receiving, but you can't give. You are seeing those leading worship, preaching, praying—but they can't see you. They don't see your eyes, your body, your solidarity. At best you're a number, piping in on a live stream.
3. We use our screens for work and entertainment, however, corporate worship is neither. Watching worship on our screens can subtly dilute the special-ness of corporate worship, making it like the other more mundane realities of life, work and entertainment.
4. Coming to worship takes more effort. You have to get dressed. You have to get in the car. If you have kids, you have to go through the routine of getting them presentable and into the minivan. In the winter, you have snow and ice and cold to deal with. This is good! We're teaching our kids, and we're training our own souls, to value corporate worship. The very effort to come in trains us in a healthy direction, reinforcing the irreplaceable value of gathering with other Christians.
5. There's not only the worship service itself; there's all the hallway time, the passing conversations, the wave across the aisle, the smile in the parking lot, the greeting while washing your hands in the restroom. All of that is lost in virtual worship from home.
6. Mentally and psychologically, there's a certain "ramp-up" as you drive to church, park, walk into the building, and settle into your seat. And there's a certain reflective "ramp-down" as you leave church, drive home, and reflect on what just happened. All of that is lost when the ramp-up and ramp-down is replaced with opening your laptop and closing it. Corporate worship must be prepared for and then absorbed, and going in physically helps facilitate that in a way that's almost certainly diluted with couch worship.
7. With whom can we pray if we're staying home? With a spouse, perhaps. But we need other Christians to pray with. We need other Christians to pray for. We want to keep learning how to move through life as if God is actually there, because He is. That growth atrophies in protracted isolation.
8. We grossly underestimate the spiritual power of encouragement, both for the encourager and for the encouraged. One reason we gather is to encourage, that is, to build courage into one another. I greet a friend; he asks how my week was; I mention a challenge I'm navigating; he says, "Hang in there; God is with you." A 30-second exchange, come and gone just like that—and my soul just got enlarged.
9. It's harder for the preacher if you are home because he can't see you. He knows some of you are out there, and he's trying to acknowledge you as he glances at the live stream camera from time to time. But he doesn't know if you're nodding along or nodding off. He has zero feedback from you. Healthy preaching is dialogical—your preacher is feeding off of your eyes, your nods, your attentiveness, as he preaches. He needs to see you.
10. And the preaching is harder for you if you're home. Sitting on your couch watching your preacher as a head on a screen simply isn't as effective as sitting 20 feet away, in a room with better acoustics, surrounded by dozens of other Christians who are also listening with you. Attentiveness to a 2-D preacher necessarily wanes compared to a 3-D preacher.
11. In corporate worship inside your church, not everything is scripted. You'll greet someone you didn't expect to see. A visitor might sit near you and you'll get the opportunity to welcome them. However, none of this happens from your couch. Everything is scripted. It's nearly impossible to have a fortuitous interaction.

12. When you're in church, you can't press mute! You can't pause it to grab another cup of coffee. You can't turn the volume up or down. You're less tempted to pull your phone out and see who just texted you. When you're at church, you're wonderfully captured by the environment. You are trapped, with other Christians, before God. That's good!

13. Perhaps you can hear the congregation sing through your speakers at home, but we all know it's not the same as hearing the real voices all around you. The same goes for saying the liturgy together like the creed, confession, or Lord's Prayer—even if through masks. There's a necessary artificiality built in when these things are done with just you and your family from your living room. Your fellow members need to hear you sing. You're strengthening them as they hear your voice. It doesn't matter if you can't carry a tune. Whether they know it or not, you're reinforcing their faith with your voice.

14. We lose the opportunity to partake of the Lord's Supper if we're at home, yet we believe that this is a vital source of spiritual strengthening—not merely a memorial act.

15. The more time goes by, and the more comfortable we get trying to do worship from home, the more “out of spiritual shape” we're getting. We're not exercising our corporate spiritual muscles. The longer we wait, the more normal it will feel for us to do worship from home. For the above reasons, that's less than ideal.

I don't write this to make any one feel guilty, but rather to remind us all of the importance of corporate worship and what we lose when we fail to come together. I encourage everyone to prayerfully reflect on what God might be saying to you through these 15 reflections. The challenges of the last 18 months have not been easy for any of us. Let's be patient with each other. Let's love and understand and show grace to each other. But with the requisite safety precautions in place, let's lovingly encourage each other to come together for corporate worship as able. This virus is bad. I get it. Let's protect our bodies, but let's also do all we can to feed our souls. Scripture is clear: we need more than just to not get sick. My plan for the next few months is to focus on our Sunday morning worship, fellowship, and pastoral care, as we seek to re-gather and rebuild the Body of Christ at Living Waters. I hope you are willing to join me in this effort!

If I have not already seen you in church, I look forward to welcoming you back to in person worship when you feel safe to return. Until then, I would be happy to visit you, to bring Holy Communion, and to pray with you.

With confidence and hope in the risen Jesus,

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“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”
(John 7:37-38)