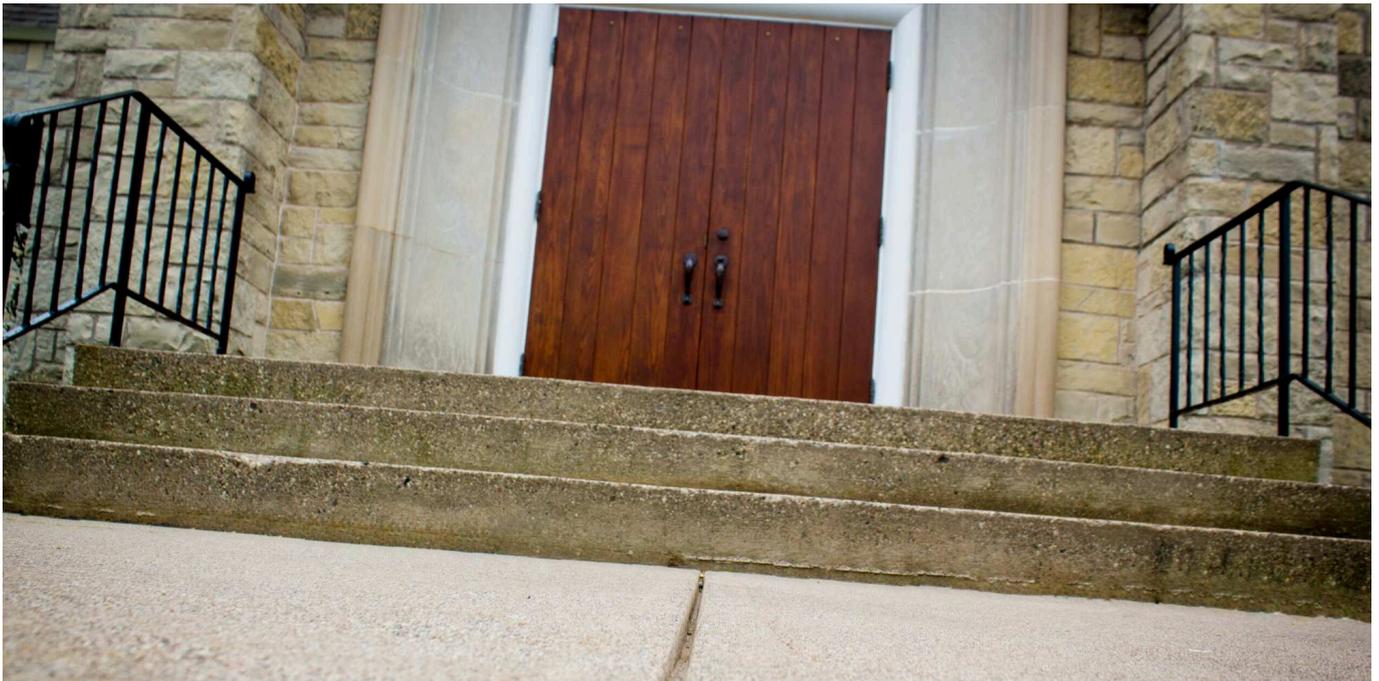


Why Are Congregations Canceling Service? It's Love, Not Fear

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Reading Time: 4 minutes

Obviously, we live in unsettled times. I have never personally witnessed anything like the closures and cancelations on the scale that we have seen in the last week. Of course, this pandemic impacts churches as much as any organization because the church is made up of people. Congregations have struggled to know what to do and how to respond. I have seen everything from, “We are canceling everything” to, “Nothing will change here, give me a hug!” I personally wish that the answers about the appropriate course of action were clearer, but they are not. These are not things specifically addressed in the Word. Each congregation has to make some of those decision for themselves, and their autonomous decision should be respected like we would other matters of judgment. My personal decision is not a condemnation of your personal opinion.

Unfortunately, I have seen some who seem to imply that congregations who cancel anything are doing so out of fear. As my own congregation has gone through this difficult decision-

making process in the last week (and continues to do so), I want to provide some insight into what I have witnessed as my shepherds' driving motivation: It's love, not fear!

At this point last week (first week in March 2020), I was not at all concerned about COVID-19 and its impact. I had seen the reports, but I also thought that there was a relatively low chance of it impacting me, and—even if it did—no one was expecting anything too serious. I knew that this virus could cause some serious complications (even death) for certain demographics, but so could any number of diseases. I was not really worried about it and I thought that most people were overreacting.

On Thursday, I got a text from one of our members. It just said, "Hi West!! Do you know if we will be going to the individual-per-package for the Lord's Supper?" That text hit me like a ton of bricks. You see, his wife is a currently struggling with a kidney transplant and is severely immunocompromised. If this virus enters her body, she could die. Then I started thinking of the names of all the people in our congregation who were in similar situations. All people I love and worship side by side each Lord's Day. Then I started thinking about our elderly—whom you can count on always being there whenever the doors are open—regardless of the threat—even when they should not. All of a sudden, I realized that these measures are not about me at all, they are about others whom I love.

Paul wrote in Philippians 2:3-4, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves." That great Christian principle is really what this is about. There is strong evidence now that asymptomatic (apparently totally healthy) people are spreading this virus. Children particularly may not show any symptoms at all, yet spread it among everyone with which they come in contact.

People are not canceling school and calling off youth sports because they are primarily worried about your kids getting sick. They are primarily concerned about those at home who are so vulnerable. It is this concern for others that is the driving motivator behind canceling some of our traditional activities, even if it is a personal inconvenience. In my congregation, we have canceled all congregational activities except for Sunday morning worship for the time being (and even that is subject to change). That service is being divided by location and age to prevent unnecessary contact.

When Martin Luther was dealing with The Black Death plague, he wrote these wise words that should give us some perspective as we think about what it means to be a Christian in the face of this pandemic or any other earthly challenge. He wrote,

"I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the

air, administer medicine and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance inflict and pollute others and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me however I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely as stated above. See this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God.”

This is not about fear. As Christians, we can look death square in the eye without fear (1 Cor. 15). This is not about putting God in a secondary place in our lives. At this moment, we need God and the lasting hope that can only come through Him. We are working diligently to make sure that our faith actually grows rather than shrinks through this time of trial. Measures are being taken to ensure that God, His Word, and His fellowship stay front and center during this crisis.

Our decisions as leaders in the church were based solely on love—for God and His children. That does not mean that if you chose to do less than us that you love God any less. Please don't hear that. Every situation and context is different. It just means that is why we are doing what we are doing. It is motivated by a desperate love for others. A lack of fear and love are not incompatible concepts. Hear the words of 2 Timothy 1:7, “For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.” Power and love actually walk hand in hand in all our decisions. It's love, not fear!