

To open or not to open; that is the question

The church may open one day soon, but if you open it will they come??? I received a compelling insight from an Old Testament professor of my seminary days: the fact is that many, if not most, of the Jews exiled from Jerusalem and surrounding area in 586 BCE to Babylon didn't really want to go back to the back water province of Judea. Life was good in Babylon: food in the market, a robust economy, a center of learning, and even the hanging gardens as a place to take the kids when they needed an outing. This contrasted dramatically with the Palestine / Israel which was a land of rocks, drought, and a population focused more on grain production than philosophy. In addition, there is the reality that this geographic this part of the world served as a causeway for armies marching north and south in search of more territory with the typical marauding which comes with armies on the move. As a result, the prophets had to really encourage the exiles, even a small portion of them, to go back. It should be noted that within the Babylonian Jewish community tremendous results came from remaining in their new home land: the Babylonian Talmud, the Mishna, the Midrash. It should also be noted that many good things came to and from those who chose to return: the Palestinian Talmud (from which the catalogue of our Old Testament comes), the nurturing of Jesus, and the subsequent opening of a Divine message from the people of God to the people of God beyond Judaism. There are blessings in remaining and in returning.

This past week a sub-committee of the Church Board met to discuss the options open to us at this time as we consider re-opening our doors at NPMC for worship. Last week the Provincial government gave permission for worshipping groups to meet at 30% of their seating capacity up to 150 people, provided a raft of other pre-cautionary measures are taken.¹ We went around the room sharing how each of us felt about the prospects of re-opening our church for worship, and the group was far from unified. Some voiced that that vulnerable people would too quickly rush back to an unsafe situation. Others took a "risk assessment approach": the risk level is currently low so why not open within regulations; to not open in these conditions would suggest waiting until a vaccine has distributed. Should we open the church for worship, the group discussed, how many people are actually interested in walking through the doors on a Sunday morning. At the annual meeting, Board chair Tammy Forrester noted that a survey will likely be circulated soon to determine the numbers we are considering. From there congregational leadership plans further. And we can talk more about it at the ZOOM meeting on Tuesday, 2:00 pm if you so choose.

¹ <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/government/health-care-administration-and-provider-resources/treatment-procedures-and-guidelines/emerging-public-health-issues/2019-novel-coronavirus/re-open-saskatchewan-plan/guidelines/places-of-worship-guidelines>

Some may return to worship. Some may never return to worship. Some may return to worship, but not just yet. With this in mind I would like to offer some thoughts on ways we might be respectful of the decisions others are making and the needs they have.

1. Acknowledge the stress of disagreement: we need to recognize that others will have different opinions on the question of re-opening or not re-opening; returning or not returning. We should not feel hurt if others choose differently from us. It is fine. It is what they need. God cares for those who remain in the new home as well as for those who return.
2. Communicate boundaries: Even those of us refraining from most group events will still have gatherings. Some people welcome hugs (advisedly or not) while others welcome a good 6ft of distance. Both are legitimate responses in the season we are living. It is imperative that we communicate the boundaries with which we are comfortable and honour the boundaries with which others are comfortable.
3. Saying no: Clarifying boundaries does not mean such clarification will be acknowledged, so learn to say no. It is more than fine to repeatedly clarify that one is not comfortable with a handshake, a hug, a visit closer than 2 meters. We can and do miss people, and they miss us, and sometimes for the safety of ourselves, those we hold dear, and those we serve we must sometimes say “no” to that handshake or hug.
4. Finally, this is all up for re-evaluation: the opening of the church building, the numbers of those who can gather, the guidelines around distancing. Because everything is and will be up for re-evaluation let us take our current decisions and those of others lightly. A person willing to re-engage the worshipping community this week may change her mind in three weeks time. The person hesitant to return this week may do so next week. This is the nature of the fluid times in which we are living. And we do well to simply roll with it.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What are your thoughts around the re-opening of NPMC for Sunday morning worship services? Would you attend? Why or why not?
2. Are there people in your life making different decisions than you around physical distancing? How might we live well together given a variety of responses to the opportunity for re-opening our institutions?