



March 21, 2020

Rev. Grant Van Leuven
On behalf of Session
Puritan Evangelical Church
6374 Potomac Street
San Diego, CA 92139

To the Congregation of Puritan Evangelical Church

Dear Saints,

As we announced in a brief email yesterday, Session has decided to postpone public face-to-face assemblies of worship at the church building and try and serve the Lord and you saints through online webcasts via SermonAudio.com/puritanchurch beginning this Lord's Day, March 22, to be in effect weekly with updates as we follow our magistrate's guidance and laws in this civil sphere of life to save lives. This decision was not unanimous but we move forward with it in hearty unity.

Surely, we never imagined having to stay at home and postpone worship in-person. Your Session had hoped to continue as long as possible while our smaller numbers allowed for it (and we believed it was still safe to do so while encouraging our most at-risk members to stay home). When our local government mandated maximum gatherings to 250 early on we naturally never expected our worship services to be effected. Even when the maximum restriction then went to 50, we thought we'd be able to meet for worship for some time. Now it is mandated (or at least strongly urged) by our State and Federal governments that we all stay home other than for essential needs and that no more than 10 gather together. Thankfully, our numbers exceed that maximum (especially with many visitors expressing a desire to join us from great distances). Sadly, as we will explain below, we thus decided that we need to heed these instructions and no longer gather in church for worship. Here are links that summarize the situation and the call upon us as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven to respond as good citizens of these earthly kingdoms to whom we also are responsible (including and especially the magistrates as God's ministers):

- <https://covid19.ca.gov/stay-home-except-for-essential-needs/>
- <https://calmatters.org/health/2020/03/california-coronavirus-gavin-newsom-senior-citizens-chronic-illness/>
- <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/coronavirus-guidelines-america/>
- <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-03-19/gavin-newsom-california-1-billion-federal-aid-coronavirus>

While it sometimes seems a little unclear what “essential” may include or exempt and whether a maximum of “10” in gatherings is forbidden or only strongly discouraged, our national and local magistrates are strictly guiding us to stay home and avoid spreading the virus with such guidelines.

We greatly appreciate that several in our church appealed to us to keep worship in the building open (including an elder). We also listened to a suggested sermon arguing to keep in-person worship open (by a pastor through which our church often is fed via video sermons while I’m on vacation). We took this all into prayerful discussion and have decided to heed the guidance (and mandates) of our civil leaders for this civic concern and no longer hold in-person gatherings for worship adhering to the timelines (for now) that the government has noted. We will stay in communications with you weekly through various means and encourage you to call your shepherding elder for any needs. We also will attempt to host live webcasts of our worship services from the manse (which can also be accessed audibly through SermonAudio with a landline phone call – no internet or mobile service needed, so thankfully this also should service those of our congregation who do not use computers or smart phones). I will email later with instructions to participate, but I have a lot to figure out and experiment with and I wanted to get this letter to you before the evening.

While I plan to review our reasons in the message tomorrow (more of a lecture than sermon but we will consider it worship), let us briefly outline the following as much of what informed our thinking that this would not be disobeying God, but rather obeying Him at this point in the pandemic:

- This is not a religious persecution (if it was we would insist on public worship together and be ready to face the consequences). Everyone in our society is suffering indiscriminately.
- We are not a Theocracy and while this surely in some ways is God’s judgment on our churches and society the government is not forbidding Christian worship assemblies in principal but trying to curtail an unknown pandemic that life’s religious sphere affects.
- Christianity is a religion of submission and we are to submit to God’s authority through His ordained ministers not only in the sphere of Church but also those of State: Romans 13:1-10; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13-17. We deem this situation as primarily a civic one in which we need to defer to the authorities put in place by King Jesus in that sphere and trust their medical advisors know more than we do and whatever we may disagree with yet requires our submission if it is not clearly violating God’s Word. As citizens of the Kingdom we need to be exemplary citizens of our State working peaceably with all men as much as we are able. These Scriptures are the principal decision-making verses for us. Our numbers now are above the maximum occupancy of public gatherings by law for this temporary crisis, and much has been mandated about unnecessary travel and leaving our homes as things escalate to the point where we do not deem it required by King Jesus to rebel (perhaps against Him?)
- Related to the above, please see *Westminster Confession of Faith* chapter 23, “Of the Civil Magistrate”, sections 1 and 4.
- Much of Christ’s ministry was merciful healing. It is hard to imagine at this point that our Lord would say, “Well done good and faithful servants” for having kept the physical church doors open while we could have worshipped (admittedly awkwardly) online with modern technology during a temporary situation and yet have caused the unnecessary removal of some or many of our fellow servants through death who would thus not be able to later join us in congregated worship at our building after things would have subsided. We are especially sensitive to the demographic of our congregants, many being in the greatest at-risk category both regarding age and other medical conditions.
- Westminster Larger Catechism 135 and Westminster Shorter Catechism 68 instructions on the 6th commandment requiring us to preserve and protect the lives of ourselves and others.

This outline will be some of what I plan to work with (beginning with Romans 13 as our text) to explain why we are going to online webcasts for now for live public worship as a congregation. You may want to keep it in front of you to assist you in note taking (if you like to follow along and take notes). It won't be a proclamation against the practice of others; only an apology for our own.

Let us also share that we consulted the Moderator of Presbytery (RPCGA) with whom we are in Affiliate Relations. We learned that the Texas church has the situation where their Governor made a clarification that churches are considered exempt from a similar mandate for public worship (earlier the church interpreted public worship as "essential" to continue); the Wisconsin church more in our situation has decided to fast this Lord's Day seeking more guidance on how to handle matters (earlier when the maximum occupancy was larger they planned to have an extra service to accommodate the requirement). My understanding is that they are providing sermon links to listen to online as well and may plan to petition the different levels of government.

Please pray for me as I try and navigate uncharted waters with setting up and using an online webcast tool in our home. Also, as one advisor commented, who knows what the Internet will be able to handle with such an increase of usage. Please pray we can successfully manage this effort this Lord's Day both on sending and receiving ends. But if we don't, please avail yourself of other like-minded live web stream or television church services (preferred) or published web video or audio sermons, or Christian radio messages, on the Lord's Day and spend extra time in family and private prayer, study, and worship. I hope within a few hours of this letter to send you an email with instructions for our own SermonAudio.com live worship service webcast (for morning and evening; we will not have Sabbath Class in the morning though we might attempt the teaching and memorization time after the evening service to keep normal as much as possible. We might also later try mid-week services in a similar medium if things go well).

In the mean time, we still have bills to pay. So please mail your tithes to Deacon and Treasurer Ron Renner at his home address (if you do not have his address please let me know and I will provide it for you. We are very encouraged several of you have already asked about this anticipating such a decision).

Deacon Renner (still serving as Emeritus Elder and very much involved in the Session's discussion and decision) also asked me to include this podcast link for you to listen to:

<http://theplacewefindourselves.libsyn.com/61-the-coronavirus-episode>

Also, this recent *PlaceforTruth.org* article is helpful to reference, especially the quote by Martin Luther: <https://www.placefortruth.org/blog/fearless-and-faithful-past-plagues-and-contemporary-pastors>

Let us pray this crisis will lead the Church and nations to repentance before God and faith in Jesus Christ as Lord—and that Christ would use what Satan means for evil for the good of them that love Him and add to the Church daily such as should be saved by securing their sanctified attention. And let us pray for God's mercy on behalf of His Church and its growth and the glory of His name and covenant that a remedy would soon be found and that all would thank Him through Christ.

For Christ and His Kingdom,

Grant Van Leuven,



Pastor