

May 15, 2020

Dear Members and Friends,

The Wisconsin Supreme Court rescinded state “Safer at Home” restrictions this week. Some Onalaska UMC members have asked if this means our church will re-open now. **The short answer: not yet.** The legal details of the court case do not change the realities of public health and safety in our communities.

On Thursday, La Crosse County Public Health Officer Jen Rombalski (RN, MPH) announced that La Crosse County has not met two of the main criteria for loosening restrictions – we are still unable to test enough people to monitor the disease; and instead of a decrease in COVID-19 cases, we are still rising. (“Statement of Unity and Call to Action 5/14/2020,” <https://lacrossecounty.org/covid19>)

La Crosse County is leading by example and will not open government buildings until it is safe. County leaders “strongly encourage all businesses, churches, events, and others to do the same. We will not open until we can protect our workforce and the public.”

COVID-19 remains a serious risk to our community, especially to vulnerable people including the elderly and those with existing health conditions. **As Christians, Jesus calls us to care for the poor and the sick:** “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Mat 25:40). Re-opening now, without adequate preparation and before leaders and the health system can deal with the illness, would not be caring for the least of these. We would put our vulnerable members, friends, families, and community in danger of infection.

That doesn’t mean Onalaska UMC isn’t busy. **We are serving God and loving our neighbors now more than ever.** Our staff and volunteers are leading high-quality worship services, with online attendance that exceeds our in-house worship before the pandemic. Our Stephen Ministers are contacting older members to check on them. Youth and children’s programs, and some small groups, have moved online. We confirmed eight youth recently and welcomed new members.

When it comes to caring for the poor, hungry and sick, OUMC members and friends are also excelling. Since the pandemic began, we’ve collected \$2,000+ of food and donations for the local pantries and served 260 meals through our community dinner drive-through. Our men’s group has helped with yard projects, and donated \$1,500 to help Methodist camps through the summer. Many are sewing masks and donating them to essential workers or making them available for free in the church office. Through your donations to the St. Nicholas fund, Pastor Park is aiding members with emergency financial needs.

We will re-open our building as soon as we safely can. We are assembling a COVID-19 team to assess best practices and help us put safety measures in place. In the meantime, we ask for your patience, your prayers, and your support as we continue to BE the church, the body of Christ out serving the world.

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| Wes Panzer, Council Chair | Megan Barbian, RN, Lay Leader | Becky Barnes, Stephen Leader | Mark Beahm, MD, COVID-19 Team | Rev. M. Park Hunter Pastor |

For updates on how OUMC is serving and responding, see... <http://www.onalaskaumc.org/2020/03/20/covid-19-staying-connected/>