

# A LETTER FROM DR. SEAN LUCAS

March 16, 2020

My dear Friends:

As I mentioned yesterday, our church's leadership met today to work our way through our upcoming church calendar. Before I get to what our conclusions were, I want to step back and let you know a little bit further how we have processed through the past few weeks and especially the last several days.

From the third week of February, as the novel coronavirus began to make significant impacts in China and Italy, we were in communication with a group of our medical professionals. I also serve on the board of a local hospital and so had the benefit of those communications as well; we also have followed the communications of the Shelby County Health Department and the Tennessee Department of Health. As we have gone through this early process, we have followed the interim advice of the Centers on Disease Control and relied on these advisors along the way.

Last night, the Centers for Disease Control issued new interim advice for large community events and mass gatherings—they have recommended that organizers cancel or postpone events that consist of 50 people or more throughout the United States for the next eight weeks (essentially through mid-May). They have emphasized that this advice doesn't pertain to business, schools, or institutes of higher learning, but rather to conferences, festivals, parades, concerts, sporting events, weddings, and other types of assemblies.

As of my writing this letter, our local and state authorities have not yet taken actions in line with this advice. Our governor has urged school districts to close and churches not to meet, but has not mandated this. Our city and county mayors have only closed libraries and, of course, most of our local public and private schools are closed through March 31. In addition, as you are likely aware, Shelby County has not yet seen the outbreak of the virus that many other communities have seen.

As we have processed the CDC advice, the national trends, and our local situation, **effective tomorrow, March 17, IPC will be suspending all activities and special events, except for Sunday morning worship, through April 11.**

This includes the following:

- On Sundays, there will be no nursery, Sunday school, rehearsals, student ministry, Sunday Evening Praise, or Four Corners.
- On Wednesdays, there will be no Wednesday night dinner, Grace Groups and Grief Share, Student Ministry, Larger Group Teaching, Choir Rehearsal, BLAST!, nursery, or Scouts.
- On Tuesdays and Thursdays, there will be no Women's Bible Study (either morning or evening), Men's Prayer Breakfast, In the Word Bible Study, or Knitting Ministry.
- In addition, we are suspending IPC Ballet as well as Gym and Recreation Activities (including Senior Adult Exercise) through April 11.

The upshot of this is that we are prayerful we will be back to normal weekly operations and activities starting Easter Sunday, April 12.

CONTINUED

In terms of special events that have been scheduled, IPC will be postponing or canceling the following:

- March 27-28: Women's Conference with Paige Brown (postponed)
- March 28: Children's BLAST! Gym Party (canceled)
- April 5: Palm Sunday Concert (postponed)
- April 11: Easter Eve Concert with Sara Groves (canceled)
- April 18: Tenent Community Crawfish Boil (canceled)
- April 25: Seminar with John Dunlap (postponed)
- May 2: IPC Ballet Performance (postponed)

Presently, there are a couple of events scheduled for April that we are trying to determine whether we can reschedule in the short term. More information will be coming on those events no later than April 1.

I mentioned that we are not presently suspending Sunday morning worship and I want to explain why that is the case. I think the most important reason is that this is not the first time in history the church of Jesus has experienced times of plague or pandemic. In those times, the church sought to honor the biblical principle of meeting together around God's Word, sacrament, and prayer, while recognizing some would want to protect themselves. If and until we are no longer able to meet, I think it is important for us to have that ability and option to do so. While I am grateful for the Livestream technology, it is not the same as worshipping together in the same space.

But another reason why we intend to continue Sunday morning worship is this: if we moved our worship services exclusively to our Livestream, those whom we most want to protect may be unwittingly disenfranchised from the worship they most desperately need. While we presently offer access to our services via Livestream—accessible through our website, or by going to YouTube and typing IPC Memphis in the search bar, or through our IPC app—not everyone has access to that: either from a cost standpoint or a technological savvy one. For those who are in good health and who want to participate in worship, I want to offer that as an option for as long as we are able to do so.

On the other hand, we do not want to bind people's consciences so that you might feel you are sinning against God if you don't come to the church house, but instead participate via the Livestream. In 1527, during another outbreak of the bubonic plague in Wittenburg, Martin Luther wrote a pastoral letter on whether one may flee from a deadly plague; in it, he observed that one may flee from a deadly plague if in their own conscience they have satisfied the requirement to love one's neighbor as themselves. I think that is wise counsel—if you are uncomfortable being on IPC's campus for worship over the next few Sundays, then we urge you to use the Livestream.

So, what will Sunday morning worship look like? In order to distribute people on our campus, we will offer both the 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. worship services; we will have the balcony open as well as the floor of the sanctuary; we will also stream the service to the chapel and the fellowship hall. We will be putting the hymns and songs in the worship booklet, so that you won't need to use a hymnal (and it will make for easier use for those worshipping via Livestream). And please remember, there will be no nursery care or children's church available, so if you bring your children, they will need to sit with you through the service.

In addition, the steps we took this past Sunday will be in place: we won't be passing a plate for the offering, but will have offering boxes stationed in the narthex and rotunda, and we will wipe down everything in between each service in the sanctuary, chapel, and fellowship hall. And we continue to urge everyone to self-monitor and to use common sense: if you feel poorly, if you are in a high-risk pregnancy, if you are immuno-compromised, or if you experience respiratory illness or disease, please do not come.

Now, there may come a time when our local and/or state authorities mandate that we are unable to worship. At that point, we will make alternative plans. Obviously, this entire situation is fluid and changing rapidly as we receive more information and as the virus spreads through different communities. But we wanted to take action today that will hopefully limit the number of times we have to communicate with the entire congregation and that will provide guidance to us as leadership and staff for the next four weeks or so.

Perhaps it goes without saying, but I did want to tell you that your pastors, elders, deacons, and other ministry staff are here to care for you. If you have anything that comes up that we can assist you with, we want to know and be present with you as we are able. This is obviously an anxious time for us all and we are here to care for you and shepherd you through these days.

I know this has been a long letter—but let me say two things more. First, I would urge you to pray. Pray for those who are fearful and anxious (which means praying for yourself too!); pray for those who are getting sick with this virus; pray for those who may lose their jobs or businesses because of the economic impact of the coming weeks; pray for those whose retirement is affected by the drop in the markets; pray for our leaders—national, state, local—that they would have wisdom; pray for the scientists as they work on vaccines and antiviral medicines. Turn your worries into prayers.

Second, I would encourage you to love. Use this season to grow in your love for Jesus, for your spouse, your family. Love your neighbor—call each other, look out for each other, share with each other, check on each other. Love your fellow church member whom you may not know—Mike Malone is putting a list of mature saints together who might need help with getting groceries or medicines; let him know that you are willing to help. Love the strangers who aren't getting their school meals or who lost their jobs and need help.

I think if we use this season to pray and to love, this will not be wasted time. We will look back on this season and remark not on the virus or its effects, but on God's goodness in turning that which was evil into salvation for his people and his world. That's our hope and longing and expectation.

In the grip of God's grace,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Stan".