

## Reasons for UBC Gathering Protocols

During the pandemic of COVID-19, our world, communities and churches have dealt with differing opinions from one end of the spectrum to the other about what our response should be, and our Christian duties and behaviors associated with that response. The following is a summary of concerns UBC Elders have heard from our congregation, the Bible verses we consulted, and our reasons for responses we have chosen to take. We view this as a Bible teaching and application opportunity, and share this information in that spirit.

1. We lack faith by placing restrictions on gatherings, requiring face coverings, hugging and handshakes, and are making decisions in fear of the disease and not trusting in God.

Matthew 4:5-7 “Then the devil took Him into the holy city and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command His angels concerning you; and ‘On their hands they will bear You up, so that You will not strike Your foot against a stone.’ Jesus said to him, “On the other hand, it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Elders’ comment: We do not believe we should test God by ignoring reasonable recommendations of health authorities and not following health protocols known to slow the spread of the disease.

Acts 9:23-25 (After Saul’s conversion) “When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket.”

Elders’ comment: We are to take necessary actions after using our knowledge and making a proper assessment of the situation.

2 Timothy 1:7 “For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline.”

Elders’ comment: A “spirit of timidity” is interpreted as a lack of confidence. Because of God’s power, love and discipline, we are confident that God is leading us to the actions we have taken. We discussed that a lack of confidence, or fear, could have led us to keep the church open, so as to not place our faith and trust in God’s sovereign ability to continue to provide the means to pay our pastors and uphold the ministry He has planned for us.

2. We violate scripture by not “assembling together.” (Hebrews 10:24-25)

Acts 2:46-47, 20:7-8 “Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread together from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

“On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where we gathered together.”

Elders’ comment: There is nothing that prevents God’s people from meeting together in places besides the church building. Many early church gatherings were formed by sharing meals, or Communion (breaking bread) and meeting together in homes or other rooms to do so. Those meetings in their homes gave early Christians opportunities to invite their neighbors and friends and tell them about Jesus. The Hebrews 10 passage referenced above regarding “not forsaking our own assembling together” has to do with the Greek translation of the word “forsaking,” which speaks of desertion and abandonment by one who is part of the group, as in “as is the habit of some.”

3. We are undermining the purpose of the church and stifling ministry for Jesus.

Matthew 28:19-20 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Elders' comment: The Great Commission is Jesus' command is to go! This is a command to reach all peoples and all nations. This command is in contrast to His earlier admonition to the disciples to only go the lost sheep of Israel (Matt. 10:5-6), but in both cases, He makes the command to go. The mission field is outside the doors of the church building.

Ephesians 2:19-22 "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit."

Elders' comment: The Church Jesus has built is of people, not places. Our unity is based on what Christ did to save us from sin and eternal death, and He fits all believers together to create an integrated, solid structure that is continually being built on as the Church grows.

Colossians 1:28 "We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ."

Elders' comment: We are to continue to teach and preach God's word, but it is God who continues the work of sanctification in the believer. God's work continues in all believers and at all times, regardless of circumstances.

4. Churches are exempt from the restrictions and protocols of meeting together, even though stores, restaurants and other public places are not.

1 Peter 2:12 "Keep behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation."

1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need."

Elders' comment: We are to continue doing things that are seen as doing good and right to those outside the church, so that those who are carefully watching our actions may ultimately join us in glorifying God. Our Christian witness should be to draw people to us, because they see our gentle behavior despite the stress of the situation.

5. We are giving in to the government by letting them tell us how to meet.

Romans 13:1 and following "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore, whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing."

1 Peter 2: 13-14 "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men."

Elders' comment: All government is ordained by God, both good and bad. When civil rulers overstep their proper function, the Christian is to obey God rather than men. We don't view the safety protocols recommended by the CDC or local health agencies as unreasonable or stifling our ability to meet and worship. We chose not to meet for a time and to follow these recommendations, since there was conflicting information about the disease and how it was spread. This was motivated by our desire to protect the flock, and our most vulnerable attenders. Following these recommendations by those in authority also impacts our witness to our neighbors (as in #4 above). It also was influenced by the "Reasons for our Restrictions" section below.

6. We are taking this disease too seriously.

Ephesians 5:10 "Trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord."

James 3:13-18 "Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show you by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes from down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace."

Elders' comment: As we considered how this disease might impact our church body, our proper response, and considered all the input we received, we prayed for God's wisdom to guide us, and to do what is pleasing to Him. As we watched our community respond to authorities' recommendations and their actions, we landed on the James 3 passage to help us know which actions reflect the wisdom of God. There is a dichotomy in these verses; the wisdom that does not come down from above is earthly, natural, demonic. It is identified by jealousy, selfish ambition, disorder and evil. However, the wisdom that comes from above is identified by its purity, peace, gentleness, reasonableness, and it's full of mercy and good fruits. Its seed is righteousness, planted in peace by peacemakers. We believe these observed actions in how people respond to authority, directives and reasonable requests, is indicative of the type of wisdom people are using. God is not a God of confusion but of peace (1 Corinthians 14:33). Just as the fruits of the spirit help identify the believer (Galatians 5:22-23), so do the actions of people. Discord, as it's defined above, cannot produce righteousness, peace, or unity.

7. We don't have to obey church authorities and leaders.

1 Corinthians 16:15-16 "Now I urge you brethren (you know the household of Stephanas, that they were the first fruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints), that you also be in subjection to such men and to everyone who helps in the work and labors."

Hebrews 13:17 "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you."

Elders' comment: Hebrews 13:18 "Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things." The desire of our hearts is to serve God and serve the body of believers in our church, to do what is right and pleasing in the sight of the Lord, being guided by scripture and the Holy Spirit.

## Reasons for our Restrictions

1. To look out for the physical well-being of the flock in our role as church leaders.

1 Peter 5:1-4 "Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory."

Acts 20:28 "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."

1 Timothy 3:1 and following "It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach . . ."

Titus 1:5 and following "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion . . ."

Elders' comment: Peter uses a metaphor that Christ used, to shepherd the flock. After the resurrection, Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved Him, and to "tend my lambs," "Shepherd my sheep," and "Tend my sheep" (John 21: 15-17). It is clear we are to do whatever it takes to protect and guard the flock God has given us out of love for Him. There are requirements for those in the position, qualifiers demonstrating they are equipped for the work. The lives

lived and fruit produced indicate that they possess the attributes of those with the “wisdom from above” in James 3:13-18.

2. To demonstrate love for our neighbor, both in our church and beyond, so as to do our part in not spreading the disease.

Mark 12:31 “(Jesus said), The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

John 13:34-35 “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this, all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Elders’ comment: We are driven by Christ’s command to love one another. The apostle Paul defines it this way: “Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). Love for our vulnerable church population allows us to bear and endure these times of inconvenience, and to set aside our preferences for their good. It gives us the patience needed to wait to resume our “normal” activities and way of life.

3. To consider our wants and desires as subservient to the safety and well-being of others.

Philippians 2:3-5 “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.”

Romans 12:12 “Rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer.”

Elders’ comment: The Philippians passage is the primary passage that led to our decisions to implement the measures we took on how we would meet in our church building. It takes humility to surrender our wants and desires for the good of others, those we believe could be at risk from the disease. We are clearly instructed to regard others as more important than ourselves. We are not only look out for our own interests, but also for the interests of others, since this is a Christ-like attitude. It’s OK to have our own personal interests, but in the body of Christ, there needs to be equal concern for the interests of others. Part of the Christian walk is to adopt an attitude of self-sacrifice, coming from humility, so we can love others.

4. To obey government authorities and consider their advice.

Romans 13:1 and following “Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God . . .”

1 Peter 2: 13-14 “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men.”

Elders’ comment: These verses and comments are similar to #5 above. All government is ordained by God, both good and bad. When civil rulers overstep their proper function, the Christian is to obey God rather than men. We don’t view the safety protocols recommended by the CDC or local health agencies as unreasonable or stifling our ability to meet and worship. Most are recommendations, and the mandate of wearing a mask to help prevent the spread of disease is reasonable, in our view. We chose not to meet for a time and to follow these recommendations, since there was conflicting information about the disease and how it was spread. This was motivated by our desire to protect the flock, and our most vulnerable attenders. Following these recommendations by those in authority also impacts our witness to our neighbors.

5. To follow Christian liberty in doing what we think is best for our church family.

Romans 14:10, 22 “But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.” “The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.”

Galatians 5:13-15 “For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.”

Elders comment: Freedom and liberty in our country and in Christ are both defined by boundaries. Christian freedom is bound by love we have for our neighbor and fellow believers, which is demonstrated by serving each other. Our great desire is that our church “preserves the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1-3). Paul instructs believer to “be diligent” (make every effort), “to maintain” (keep up with it, operate at top efficiency) the unity of the spirit. This requires the traits of humility, gentleness, patience, and showing tolerance for one another in love.” We are to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called.” I give up my own desires to be worthy of the calling to follow Jesus.