

Decision Making Amid Covid-19

Over the past few weeks, I have shared with our churches both guidelines and tools for discernment with regard to resuming in-person worship. Today I share a reflection based on my own experience. I do so because it occurs to me that there is yet another important perspective we need to consider in all this. I learned this amidst my decision making for what would be happening at Horton Center this summer.

I will admit that my discernment regarding Horton Center's summer program probably started from a skewed perspective. I went in asking more of "How do we hold camp at Horton Center?" rather than "Should we hold camp at Horton Center?" In the conversations I had with others to aide my discernment, I generally focused on three questions: 1) Will it be safe to have camp at Horton Center this summer? 2) What will we have to modify to keep Horton Center a safe place with the realities of Covid-19? 3) If we can't have on-site camp safely, what is our alternative? The answer to the first and last questions became clear. No, given our unique site, structure and staffing at Horton Center we were not going to be able to hold on-site camp and keep people safe. With HC@home, we not only found an alternative that we thought could work, but one that really started to excite us. But it was the second of these questions, however, that I found to be surprisingly impactful on my decision making.

As I started to consider what modifications would need to be made to keep people safe at Horton Center, I would piece these changes together to get a mental picture of what our camp program would look like. There could be no ropes course because spotting requires close proximity. We probably couldn't allow most field games for the same reason. There could be no climbing because we were not going to be able to continually clean shared equipment. We couldn't cave because of proximity. We would need to limit the number of campers to only a few per cabin which would drastically increase the number counselors we'd need. We would have to totally rethink how meals are spaced and served in the dining hall. Cleaning routines for common bathrooms would need to be drastically altered. We wouldn't even be able to hold hands and sing "Shalom" around the peace pole at the end of the night. (All of our conversations occurred before the current information that we shouldn't be singing in community at all.) As I put this mental image together in my head, I realized our program would be so modified, and at times diminished, that it was not going to feel like a Horton Center experience. I even started to wonder if our youth would feel a deeper sense of loss being on-site at Horton Center but with so many limits placed that we couldn't possibly be the type of community we usually are at Horton Center. This was incredibly impactful in my decision making.

I've been thinking about this a lot as I am hearing about our churches' conversations regarding resuming in-person worship. I think there is often an assumption we make that getting back to in-person worship as quickly as possible is what is best for us. I'll admit, I am starting to question that assumption. As I piece together my mental image of what worship will look like in its modified form, I start to wonder. A significant portion of our communities won't (or at

least shouldn't) be worshipping with us because it is too high of a health risk. There should be no choral or congregational singing. There should be no greeting lines. Communion, baptisms, collection of the offering, children's messages, passing of the peace, as so much more will need to happen in significantly altered ways. Coffee hour will either not happen or need to be drastically reconceived. I think it is hard for us to get our heads wrapped around just how different our worship experience will be when we again gather in our sanctuary. But I also believe, from my own experience, that piecing that mental image together is going to be impactful on our decision making.

Friends, I have a deep longing for the days when I am again able to gather with you for worship in your churches. But I find myself wondering if the "alternative" formats we are using for worship right now might be the most effective and meaningful ways to worship for many months to come. Could our alternative worship formats be what best serves our community in these days? That is a question I offer to you, our church leaders, for your decision making.

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