We miss you.

We would love to see you again. We would especially enjoy gathering as a church in ways that are familiar and bring all the joys and benefits of being together. Many of you are asking, “When can we gather again?” We want to be clear in both our intentions, reasoning, and plans for future Harbor Churches gatherings.

We believe that gathering online and beginning to gather in smaller groups is the right next step before gathering again in larger groups for worship. Though there are many reasons for this decision, the one with the greatest weight is that the COVID-19 virus tends to spread most and containment is more difficult with larger group gatherings.

It is important to note that Michigan churches have always been exempt from the Executive Orders and have not been ordered to cease gatherings. In fact, on March 11, Harbor Churches made the initial decision to suspend Sunday in-person gatherings in response to the Michigan Department of Health recommendations prior to the Governor’s stay-at-home orders on March 13. At this time, due to safety concerns, we continue to believe it is premature for us to gather in larger groups. Our initial move online has now been expanded into 4 Stages of gatherings as we move forward until it is safer to gather again in larger groups and larger venues.

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Four Stages
We continue to watch the Michigan Department of Health Data for Ottawa and Kent County for a sustained reduction of new cases in our local communities. Our plan at this point is to scale gatherings based on this data, paying specific attention to new cases and the epidemic risk level determined by health officials. COVID-19 seems to spread the most in larger venues and crowds where people are together for a period of time longer than 15 minutes – which sounds a lot like our normal Sunday gathering! Though data doesn’t provide dates, we anticipate entering Stage 2 when Stay-at-Home orders are lifted and entering Stages 3 and 4 based on sustained case reductions in Ottawa and Kent County. We will also continue to take into consideration what we learn from churches that are opening in the coming weeks and adjust accordingly.

In the next stage, we want to invite you to gather in small groups for Harbor at Home with friends, family, and neighbors. We will then begin limited capacity gatherings in our facilities in Stage 3, while honoring health precautions when we gather. During this stage, we will work hard on special accommodations and social distancing guidelines onsite while continuing online and Harbor at Home resourcing for groups and families. Our churches in rental facilities will, due to necessity, need to seek different solutions that are yet to be determined during this stage. In Stage 4, we will move to full gatherings in a “new normal.” These four stages will take into consideration local data on new case thresholds and gathering size recommendations.

Wisdom, Humility, and Generosity
Some of you will wish for an earlier opening while others will find these movements reassuring. While we recognize that our culture right now is particularly divided, volatile, and in conflict over the many things, the posture we are seeking as a church is to be wise, generous, and loving in our differences as we make these difficult decisions.

Families, business leaders, school officials, elected representatives, other churches, and many more are also feeling the weight of these decisions in an unprecedented situation without clear answers. As your pastors, these decisions are focused on Harbor Churches. Our decisions are not a commentary on economic reopening, business decisions, school decisions, government or others. Our hope is that, as Christians, we can demonstrate the humility of Jesus in our engagement with one another and the world around us. Different church leaders will make different decisions based on different values, convictions, and information, and we have been in conversation with many pastors both locally and around the country. We commit to humility, prayer, and seeking wisdom in our decision-making, and to generosity in honoring the work of others with whom we may differ. We ask you to join us in humility, prayer, seeking wisdom, generosity, and honor.

Our Ongoing Process
We continue to pay close attention to Federal, State, and Local information. We are gathering regularly with pastors of other churches across denominations both locally and around the country to seek wisdom, gain insight, and learn best practices. We are paying attention to emerging data and listening to leaders of churches and areas that are opening up sooner than we are. We are having conversations with our staff, with many of you, and seeking wisdom and affirmation from our board. Weekly, we are meeting and discussing new developments, new insights, and new information, seeking to be flexible, nimble, and wise.

If you are interested in more details about our decision-making process, the values that are driving our decisions, and the questions we’ve been asking, we hope that you will contact your Lead Pastor or our Senior Pastor Tom Elenbaas for more conversation. We would be glad to share openly with you, including sharing additional documents we developed through our research and decision-making.

Survey
Lastly, the past two months have been difficult for a lot of people. The current COVID-19 crisis has created and enhanced many areas of struggle for people in our community and church family. Since the beginning of COVID-19, we’ve had a place on our websites for you to reach out for help or to provide help and many of you have taken advantage of that. Some of you have also reached out through emails, phone calls, or social media. In an effort to see how you’re doing after over 10 weeks of this present reality, and to hear your thoughts on resuming in-person gatherings, we’ve developed a survey that will help us to Care and Respond to you in additional ways. If you could take 5 minutes to fill out this short survey, we would be grateful!