



FPC HOUSTON

September 16, 2020

## Dear FPC Family,

I pray this letter finds you well and persevering through the myriad of challenges this season. Like you, I long for a return to normal, while also realizing that we may not experience that blessing for some time yet.

I'm writing to update you on the state of several things at First Pres, but before I do, I want to thank you for all of your prayers and expressions of concern over my positive COVID-19 test result back in August. I'm very grateful to report that two follow-up tests were negative and allowed us to conclude that the first test was a false positive. At the same time, I must admit to feeling a little sheepish for the concern this created. Life during Corona!

I also want to thank you for the kind words you have expressed to me regarding the staff and the session's efforts to keep us as connected as possible during this season. I'm very proud of how we have not only attempted to stay connected during these challenging months—but that we have continued to find ways to serve our community together. Please [click here](#) for a look at some of the ways we have been **Here to Serve** each other, our neighbors, and the broader Houston community.

As we seek to open the building and increase capacity during worship over these next weeks, I hope that our connection to one another and our opportunities to serve will only grow stronger.

## Worship Update

**Beginning this Sunday, September 20, we will begin an increase in our in-person worship capacity in the Sanctuary from 100 to 130.** Further, as the growth and rate of the spread of the virus in Houston continue to decline, our prayer is that we will be able to keep “bumping up” that capacity every couple of weeks. On this same Sunday, we will also launch our new study of Ephesians, **Rediscovering Church**, in worship and through our online discipleship ministries and small groups.

**Also, on Sunday, September 20, we will launch a new in-home worship initiative** that was created in response to the limitations in gathering we all have experienced during this unpredictable season. For those who are not yet comfortable gathering in larger settings, the opportunity to meet in person in smaller settings might be an ideal option. The first in-home worship gatherings will occur this Sunday, with monthly opportunities moving forward in the fall. Registration is required and has already opened. For more information and to RSVP, [click here](#).

**At the same time, we continue to encourage those small groups who are meeting to worship together to continue to do so. Please let us know how we can help with that!**

If you want to coordinate your own in-home group or have young children and want to gather with one or two other families, you can now access a recording of the service and a PDF of the corresponding Children and Family Ministry Sunday School lesson [here](#).

**On Sunday, September 27, we will add a second in-person worship service.** This will be a contemporary service and will be held in the Grand Hall at 10:45 AM. In the beginning, the room's capacity will be limited to 130 people, similar to the Sanctuary. As this new service will be contemporary in style and music, our in-person service in the Sanctuary will shift to a more traditional service style.

Weekly registration for both services will open at 10 AM on the preceding Monday and can be accessed from our [Save A Seat](#) page.

**Finally, on Sunday, October 4,** we will make two additional adjustments to our worship service offerings. First, we will return to a live stream of the in-person Sanctuary service as it takes place on Sunday mornings at 10:45 AM. Second, we will add a pre-recorded contemporary service to our online offering, which will be offered at 10:00 AM. This service will be hosted by an online pastor and feature live prayer, similar to our current online service.

This means that as of Sunday, October 4, we will offer **two in-person services** on the FPC campus (one traditional in the Sanctuary and one contemporary in the Grand Hall), and **two online services** (again, one traditional in style and one contemporary), along with our in-home option. Please visit our [More Ways to Worship](#) page for information on all five of FPC's fall worship service options.

## Financial Update

Although the pandemic has caused us to reconsider *how* many of us give, I am pleased to report that we have been successful in adapting, and we remain largely on track with our projections. Through August 31, 2020, we have collected \$9.6 million (34%) of our projected \$28.2 million Here to Serve campaign gifts and pledges with sixteen months to go. This activity represents approximately 90% of what we forecasted giving to be, which is encouraging in light of the challenges that so many have faced in these unprecedented times. Thank you for your continued faithful generosity and continued disciplined giving. We are carefully managing operating expenses, which are in line with the budget approved by Session through August. Our liquidity position is strong, with approximately \$6 million of cash in the bank as of the end of August, due in large part by Here to Serve projects that have been delayed as further discussed below.

For those in our congregation 70 ½ or older, you may have a unique giving opportunity. Even though the CARES Act allows you to waive your Required Minimum Distribution (RMD) for 2020, you can still donate through your IRA using a Qualified Charitable Distribution. For the 2020 tax year, you are allowed to gift up to \$100,000, in aggregate, paid outright to charities directly from your Individual Retirement Arrangement (IRA) on a pre-tax basis prior to December 31, 2020. For those who are age 72 or older in 2021, it will reduce the balance of your IRA, which in turn, may reduce your RMD and tax liability in 2021, as well. Please consult your tax advisor for more information and to address this strategy's appropriateness to your specific tax situation.

## HERE TO SERVE Update

As you will recall, we were making great progress on our two-year (January 2020 to December 2022) **Here to Serve** (HTS) campaign when COVID-19 prompted a city-wide shut down in March. At that point, as noted above, we projected \$28.2 million in gifts and pledges and had begun moving forward on several of the projects that you had agreed to support, such as the remodeling of our Children's Ministry space, the expansion of our Media & Communications capabilities and several Facility Renewal projects such as painting the Sanctuary and fixing or replacing many of the windows and doors around the campus.

When Session made the decision to shut down the campus because of the Coronavirus, we also made the decision to put all HTS projects on hold *except* for the Media & Communications upgrades (which became critical as we shifted from in-person to online worship and discipleship) and various Facility Renewal projects that could be accomplished even as access to the building was restricted. The projects placed on hold include the Children's Ministry space mentioned above, our interface with the MFAH (which is nearly ready to open), the expansion of the Sanctuary Narthex, and improvements to the Sanctuary Entrance and the North Parking Lot.

Today, although we find ourselves trying to plan in an environment in which “long-range planning” can mean, “*What are we hoping to do next week?*”—we do need to determine our priorities and next steps for moving forward. This process will begin with a conversation at Session, an assessment of both our finances and the broader economic environment we find ourselves in—and a conversation with you.

We began this process in last night's Session meeting and will provide regular updates for you as we go forward. In the meantime, if you would like to discuss the HTS plan with me, please don't hesitate to call or send me an email. I'd love to get your feedback and will try my best to answer any questions that you might have.

## In Closing

Thanks for hanging in there through a long email. Hopefully, this communication has left you both encouraged and better informed! We will continue to email our daily messages of encouragement and encourage you to stay up to date by reading our weekly “email updates” and checking the FPC website from time to time.

It is a great pleasure to be a part of this amazing FPC family and a great honor to serve as your pastor. I'm praying that soon we can be together face to face. In the meantime, please don't hesitate to call or email if you have any questions or concerns.

## In Christ,

**Jim Birchfield**  
Senior Pastor

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