

Hey everybody and thanks for joining us. I really miss seeing you but I'm super excited because I think 2021 is going to be a great year for reconnecting and re-gathering for us as a church. I also think it's going to be a great year because we're going to have a story to tell about how God got us all through this time as a church. So, I'm going to answer three big questions that came in.

Q.1: What are our re-gathering plans?

First, I just want to take a moment and thank all of you in our congregation for your grace and flexibility as we've been working hard to continue the mission of the church in what was one of the most challenging years in quite some time. 2020 really surprised us. And I want to thank you for the hard work you've done in helping us all navigate it together. The world around us, the culture, and even our own sinful tendencies always threaten to pull us apart, but we've worked hard to stay together.

I also want to thank our church staff, who for many, their job descriptions flew out the door and they had to completely reinvent what they were doing to stay on mission while also balancing their personal lives and families. And I'd really regret not taking this moment to thank and honor one of our staff members who we lost due to the coronavirus. You may or may not have heard that Juan Carlos Guzman on our night crew team caught and passed away from COVID-19 on December 30. Juan Carlos was a hardworking, kind, and joyful follower of Jesus. He was an example of how the Bible says, "whatever you find to do, do it as unto the Lord." We're incredibly sad about his passing, but believe that he is fully alive with Jesus right now, I'm looking forward to you meeting him in God's kingdom.

We've been discussing and working through our re-gathering plans for months. There are a lot of details, moving parts, and stuff we are still finalizing, so let me share with you a few things about our decision making process.

1. We all have different feelings and convictions about re-gathering.

We realize that some of us are very eager to re-gather (and may feel like we should have done it sooner), while others are really concerned about re-gathering (and may feel like we are re-gathering too soon). Though it may be tempting to frame them this way, we believe that our differences are not about right or wrong, biblical or unbiblical. We can take our cues from Paul's advice in Romans 14 about how we need to relate to each other with humility and mutual submission when we have differences of feelings or convictions.

2. We are trying to have as few start-and-stop changes as possible.

This was our plan since March of last year. We've had a lot of options for re-gathering in different ways, but we felt it would add more layers of unpredictability, stress, and challenges by starting and stopping things based on changes in the virus and guidelines. We want to create a steady, empowering, and encouraging experience for our whole congregation.

3. We do NOT see the guidelines as persecution of the church in California.

We know there are Christian websites and leaders that promote this view. We do not share this view. We believe we are facing a health crisis, and while we may have different views about how this crisis is being handled, we want to work with our state, county, and local officials. We are praying for wisdom and decision-making, and thankful for the freedoms and flexibilities houses of worship are given within the guidelines. We believe relationship, connection, and cooperation is how people can experience the Good News of Jesus.

So let me share our plans. There's a lot here so don't worry about remembering all this. We're going to send out a transcript of this whole thing. So just sit back and take in the big ideas and we can get into details later. The first thing we'll be doing is:

A - Outdoor Life Group Meetings

We'll be working with our Life Group leaders to discern the comfort level of their group and work within our LA county guidelines for 3 households, 15 people max. Our life group team is finalizing our guidelines for group re-gathering and will communicate with group leaders so that groups can determine when they will begin to re-gather for in-person meetings. Some of our groups have been meeting online and are eager to gather in person; other groups have been meeting online and will choose to stay online longer. We will work with everyone to make sure that they can have the opportunity to begin in-person gatherings when they are ready.

B - Outdoor Events

We are planning some special outdoors events for worship and prayer. These will not replace our Sunday services. They will be an opportunity for anyone who wants to join together from both our campuses. We will also offer times for our student to gather as well. Again, these special events won't replace what we are doing online for Sunday church services. We are hopeful that this will begin soon after Easter, but we will announce dates, times and specifics on how to join us as soon as we can. We have some other ideas we're working on right now and we'll let you know as we finalize them.

C - Indoor Home Watch Parties and On-Campus Watch Parties

As conditions continue to improve and the risk continues to decrease, we will launch opportunities in homes throughout the South Bay and on our two campuses to be together and watch the online services. We believe that this will be a unique way to re-engage as a larger church body. We also hope that this season may awaken a call in many of you to renew your commitment to serve or join a new team! We don't want to commit to timelines we cannot predict but hope this could begin by late spring or early summer.

D - Indoor Church Services on Both Campuses

And finally, the goal is to resume live in person church services as soon as it would be best with all of our moving parts as a 3000 person, multisite church. We're talking live worship, singing, serving opportunities, and children programs. We anticipate this happening in line with the ability to have 50% or more of capacity within our auditorium at Manhattan Beach and Torrance, and we hope to see this by mid-summer. If it happens before, we'll be ready.

Now, I mentioned children's programs here at the end, but not throughout. We're working on when these come in. We want them as soon as possible, but we also know that those of you with small kids at home may not be ready to jump back into church without something for the kids, and we want to make sure we have enough of our awesome volunteers who are ready to re-gather to run these well, which is

why we are making sure that our online experience is not a second class experience but has the same level of excellence for everyone.

So, we're going to put all this together and send it out to you electronically, we're also going to have it on the COVID-19 section of our website and if you have questions, concerns, encouragements, or stories of great things God has been doing during this time... email us, call us, reach out. We want to communicate well about this and not slip into assumptions, gossip, or have confusion that leads to hurt feelings. Let's assume the best in each other and celebrate what God has been doing and will be doing.

So, I know this was a lot. I'm sure you have questions about this. Again, we'll have all this on the COVID-19 section of our website and we'll send you a transcript of this whole town hall. Also, we know many of you may want to help and volunteer in the rollout of these plans. You can contact us through info@journeyoffaith.com. We will give everyone more details as we have them.

Here's a second question:

Q.2: I know of people who, during this season, are visiting or moving to other churches who are doing things differently. How should I respond to that?"

So, I've been meeting with a lot of pastors in the South Bay. About 30 of us meet every month to discuss leadership, church, and be there for each other. And we've noticed a few things: some people are really thriving during this season, other people have dropped out of church all together, and some people are attending multiple churches (maybe even over-churched during this season).

We're all getting the opportunity to see how different churches do things (preaching, programming, how they relate to the world around them, stuff like that). And in this time, some people from Journey are thinking, I kind of like this other church now (just like people from other churches are like, I think God may be calling me to Journey of Faith). By the way, us pastors and talking to each other about these movements from church to church and here's a few tips:

1. See change as a grieving process.

Change is difficult. Most people will not attend the same church their whole life, so changes in churches are actually pretty normal. But when we or our friends decide to change churches, for whatever reason, it's a loss. Like any loss (moving out of state, the end of relationship, changing schools, having a loved one pass away), accept the feelings we don't like to have (like sadness, fear, confusion) and invite God into them, so God can help you. I like how the prophet Isaiah says that the Messiah, Jesus, is someone very familiar with grief. That means Jesus knows what change and loss is like and can help us through it. But it's normal and natural and we can help each other get through it.

2. Avoid black-and-white thinking about how church is done.

This is really important. Sometimes when people leave a church they say, "there's a more biblical church over here, or this person is really teaching the Bible, or our church doesn't believe the truth anymore." We Christians tend to see things as right and wrong, or biblical or unbiblical, when it might be more a matter of personal conviction or preference. Our mission and message are the same, but as a church our methods change all the time. I've been here for 21 years, some of you much longer. Programs change, how we communicate changes, leaders change. It's okay to say, "I feel like my needs or desires might have me going elsewhere." It's not okay to say: "Journey doesn't teach the Word anymore." "Journey is living in fear." "Journey only cares about non-Christians" or "Journey is only focused on numbers." These are lies. This is slander and divisive (and the Bible is super clear that these are sins). If people are sensing

a call to fellowship elsewhere for a time, or permanently, encourage people to finish well. When I left the church I got saved in, I thanked them for how the church had changed my life, shared some of what was happening in me, and I prayed for God to continue his work through them. Recognize the difference between personal preference and conviction and what is biblical. And this leads into my third piece of advice...

3. Celebrate the unity we have in Christ.

I already mentioned how we pastors in the South Bay meet together, pray for each other, and celebrate what we are all doing in different ways. We all have the same mission, but we do things really differently. In fact, we need different kinds of churches, different kinds of preaching, music, compassion ministries, and family programs because there are so many different kinds of people in the South Bay. We have churches that are growing and starting multiple sites, churches that are planting new churches, and churches that are intentionally small. Something for everyone! And we want people to plug in, find a church home, and attend, engage, serve there, give generously, and share their faith with people far from God. We can all do these things in different ways in the South Bay.

And let me just tell you something encouraging that you might already know, Journey of Faith is really healthy right now. People are coming and meeting Jesus. People are getting connected and growing in their faith. This online season may make it a little hard to see (even though we're working really hard to bring you life change stories every week), but growth and health and spiritual transformation in Jesus is still happening.

One more question...

Q.3: What's coming up that we can get excited about?

We've got some great things coming up in the next few months. Our self-care series online is getting great response. It's really needed right now. I'm super pumped about our pre-Easter message series. Right now, we're calling it How God Rescues Us. We're going to explore what does it actually mean when we say "Jesus died on the cross for my sins."? You theology nerds and mission's nerds are going to love this because we're talking about theories of atonement seen through cross-cultural ministry. But for the rest of us (most of us actually) this is going to be a super-understandable and practical series designed to help you share your faith with people in new and powerful ways!

And then our teams are working hard to put together a great online Easter service for us. We're also going to do baptisms. If you have never publicly said, "I am a follower of Jesus." by being baptized, would you do that with us? You can get baptized in a smaller, safe setting with guidelines, and then we'll show it on Easter. Visit journeyoffaith.com/baptism to learn more and register.

Some of you asked questions about "discipleship" and how we choose our sermons for the year. I'll answer those and send them out electronically with a transcript of this town hall. We will be adding this content to a future post.

Let me end with reading a section of the Bible that I think can help us as we move forward with re-gathering plans as well as when we talk with people who are finding church for the first time or changing churches. This is written by Paul, one of the first church leaders in early Christianity. He's writing to Christians who were made up of a lot of smaller house churches, living in a very polarized culture. He's calling Christians to unity in what is most important. Here's what he says....

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1-6)

As we move into a time of many transitions in our culture, re-gathering, which includes real concerns and fears for people, let's ramp up our communication with what Paul says here: humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with each other (that means kindly putting up with differences you have with others). Paul doesn't say put the most effort into making your views known, accuse people of living in fear, huddle together with people who see things exactly like you do, or stay up to date on the website you agree with. He says, put the most effort into unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. He says, we may have differences of opinions, even strong convictions about things, but there is only one church, one faith, one Jesus, one God, and he's working in and through all of us. Let's stay focused on Jesus and his mission, so those around us will be curious and want to check out what Jesus has to offer them in this confusing, angry, and polarized world.

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