



The Benefits of Exercise

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The CDC's hopeful news that fully vaccinated people need not wear a mask in most circumstances has prompted most of our congregations to consider how they might return to pre-pandemic worship and activities. Because the CDC's guidance is offered for individuals, however, it doesn't translate perfectly to how we will interact as a *community* of faith. Knowing that some people have not been vaccinated yet, our sessions and congregational leaders are exercising care, as they should. Rather than open up our church buildings with no restrictions -- with the effect of excluding or threatening beloved ones who are still at risk of the coronavirus -- they are acting cautiously. Be patient with them. They are exercising muscles we haven't used in a while.

I know. I hit a pothole on Sunday. Leaving a vibrant, masked, socially distanced Pentecost worship service at Living Hope Presbyterian Church, I drove home on a route I've not taken for a year and a half. Seeing the pothole ahead, I moved the steering wheel slightly to the left, so I could avoid it. Instead, my wheel took the full force of the pothole. A bystander would have thought I'd deliberately swerved to hit it. It's been a long pandemic, and I've reduced my driving to a minimum. Those muscles that knew just how to parallel park and dodge potholes have atrophied.

Many years ago, a work colleague told the story of a traffic stop on her way to work. She knew the route well, including the multi-lane, narrow, and ill-maintained freeway tunnel. Just as she passed through, lights and a siren behind her called her to a stop. "Was I going too fast?" she asked the police officer. "No," he replied, "you were swerving."

"Did I cross the lane lines?" my friend asked. "No," she heard, "but you were weaving all over the place." My friend explained her behavior: "I was dodging the potholes." She knew the route perfectly, including the dangers of the broken asphalt. She knew where they could be expected and what slight movement of the wheels it took to avoid them and not ricochet off the tunnel walls, even at top speed. She stayed within the rules and carefully dodged the obstacles.

Returning to indoor worship is not going to be as smooth as my friend's ingrained route to work. There will be new rules and traffic in our re-openings, and we need to discern carefully so we can dodge the obstacles. We need to ask probing question about how to show love to our community, including whether a hybrid form of worship (in-person and virtual) might reach more people with the gospel. We need to research whether singing is still a spreader of the virus. How do we protect our children, who are not eligible for the vaccine? Do we really want to tear bread from the same loaf, or should we continue a little longer with pre-packaged communion? Your answers must be based on the circumstances of your unique ministry, after prayer and discernment among leaders and participants. Racing ahead with no restrictions is not a quick fix to the malaise we feel. Racing ahead ignores the potholes that loom. Instead, we need to strengthen our muscles again, relearning how our community should be together as one body in Christ. With patience, the muscle memory will return. In the meanwhile, keep your eyes on the road!