

Reopening Task Force Update #6

Friends,

The Reopening Task Force met on Sunday evening, January 24th. Since our last meeting on November 12, the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic has struck and over 150,000 more Americans have perished. So far, there have been 61,709 cases and 413 deaths in Wake County alone.

Fortunately, since our last meeting, vaccinations have become available and are being administered. Unfortunately, the vaccines' roll-out has been painfully slow, particularly in Wake County.

From the beginning, the Task Force has monitored pandemic statistics and implemented the Governor's mandates under the guidance of advice received from our Bishop, District Superintendent, and healthcare professionals within our church family. Our job is to do everything within our power to ensure that our Saint Andrews' activities and facilities are not the cause of anybody becoming infected or infecting somebody else.

After considering all available information—and keeping before us our mandate to ensure the safety of every SAUMC member—the Task Force recommended to the Administrative Board this past Monday night, January 25, to continue keeping our facility closed to in-person, indoor worship, and all other meetings until further notice. The Board accepted this recommendation. The Task Force has discussed the possibility of adapting as a reopening benchmark some percentage of the congregation vaccinated, but this was tabled until our next meeting in late February, given the difficulties in getting the shots.

We are also investigating restarting in-person worship in the parking lot, subject to warmer weather and resolving current technical issues. This could happen as early as the beginning of March.

As a reminder, when we restart outside worship (with live-streaming for virtual participation), these protocols will continue to be in place:

† All worshippers will accept personal responsibility for symptom monitoring. If you have a fever, cough, or shortness of breath, please do not come to the church.

† Face masks are mandatory, even during outside worship.

† You may remain in your car, or you may bring lawn chairs and sit at your car during the worship service.

† Abide by the parking attendants' directions to socially distance by using every other parking space.

† If you are among the higher risk population due to age and/or underlying medical conditions, you bear the greatest risk of severe illness from COVID-19. We will continue to provide virtual worship opportunities for those who do not feel comfortable with in-person worship.

† The Task Force agrees that one infection of COVID-19 among attendees will result in the church's return to virtual worship.

Two questions are often asked about Saint Andrews' ongoing closure.

Q1. If we can go grocery shopping, why can't we worship indoors?

A1: The two aren't the same. Visits to a grocery store typically last less than 30 minutes; church services last an hour or more. Shoppers in a grocery store are moving; people in a church service are sitting still. Also, grocery stores are full of strangers. You aren't inclined to approach or interact with them. You won't be tempted to stand near them and have long conversations. The church is a different social environment that invites socializing, and in-person contact during a pandemic can be risky, even deadly.

Q2: Why is Saint Andrews still closed for in-person activities while so many other churches in our area are open?

A2: According to our District Superintendent, half of the United Methodist churches in the Capital District are still conducting virtual worship only. Forty percent are conducting in-person worship (whether outdoors or indoors) with masks, social distancing, and capacity limitations. Saint Andrews is, therefore, not the only church in our area still closed. Churches of other denominations may have their own reopening protocols, but we are United Methodists and have our own denominational leaders and medical professionals advising us.

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We know it's difficult to remain separate from one another. Eleven months is a long time to go without hugging brothers and sisters in Christ or hearing our wonderful choir and musicians praising God in our presence. The members of the Task Force are just as tired of isolation as anybody else. But we're confident that our recommendations are the best way to make sure that when we do come back together, we'll all still be on this side of eternity. Even one infection resulting from in-person church activities is too many.

We have prayed hard for vaccinations, and they're here. Slowly but surely, we'll get the protection we need from this terrible virus. Finally, some light is breaking through the clouds that have gathered above us for so long. We can clearly see an end to a long but necessary exile.

Please get your vaccination as soon as you can. Continue to wear a mask in public and avoid interacting with people you don't live with. Wash your hands and stay six feet away from others.

If you would like more information, we encourage you to contact Merlin Young, Chairperson of the Board of Trustees and the Reopening Task Force acting leader; Jeff Cope, acting Chairperson of the Administrative Board; or the Pastor, Vann Spivey.

God bless you all. Be safe and STAY ALIVE, for a new day is coming soon.