

April 21, 2021

Dear Friends –

Your COVID-19 Response Task Force prays that this email finds you well in this Eastertide!

Our last communication to the Presbytery was on March 17th, 2021. At that time, we reiterated our earlier recommendation that churches continue to gather virtually until at least May 1st, 2021. With May 1st on the near horizon, the Task Force met again on April 19th.

First the great good news! The number of people who have been vaccinated continues to increase. As a state, about 28% of the total population has been fully vaccinated, rising to 35% for those 18 and older and nearly 71% of those 65 and older. For that, we are truly grateful! We encourage you and your congregation members to join the vaccinated if not already among that group. Becoming vaccinated demonstrates care for oneself as well as for our neighbors.

The risk of disease remains significant; we are far from out of the woods. News outlets report increased incidence and death in some states for a variety of reasons, including emerging virus variants and the easing of COVID-19 restrictions. While North Carolina is not one of those states with a significant fourth wave of cases, we must continue our vigilance, as our incidence, hospitalization and mortality numbers have leveled or are rising slightly.

Going forward, we must be cognizant of our local and state situations with regard to case incidence, presence of variant strains and rates of vaccination. We encourage you to connect with your local health department, monitor the NCDHHS data dashboard including the COVID-19 County Alert System (<https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/media/868/download>) and review national resources such as Covid Act Now (https://covidactnow.org/us/north_carolina-nc/?s=1769690).

We continue to commend to you the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services website for information about all things COVID-19. Of particular note, is the faith leaders toolkit (<https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/information/individuals-families-and-communities/faith-leaders>).

Within the toolkit pages, a link may be found for guidelines for houses of worship (released on March 26, 2021 (<https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/media/618/download>)). Of note, NCDHHS continues to recommend conducting virtual or outdoor services. In-person gatherings, whether outside or indoors, continue to require masking and physical distancing (6 feet between people who do not live in the same household). With regard to indoor gathering, the NCDHHS guidelines recommend “limiting occupancy to 50% of the stated fire capacity (if there is not a fire capacity number for the room, limit occupancy to 12 people per 1,000 square feet).

Your Salem COVID-19 Response Task Force is not going to give you a date this time. We would love to see our churches only meeting outdoors, masked and physically distanced. But we also know that there are churches across the presbytery who have moved back to worshiping indoors along with others who are planning to do so in the near future. What we will say is pay very close attention to the metrics in your specific area and move forward in slow, incremental steps. Realize, too, that movement to relax restrictions may need to be reversed should the situation in the state worsen significantly. The last thing we want to see are churches needing to totally shut down again because they moved too quickly.

Aerosolized spread of viral particles is the principal means of infection with COVID-19. Prolonged exposure indoors, particularly with poor air circulation, poses a significant risk, particularly for the

unvaccinated with risk factors of elevated age or underlying health concerns. As such, reduce the amount of time you spend indoors (i.e., shorten services) and be certain to consider means to facilitate air circulation (open windows, fans, increased turnover through your HVAC system with outside air, etc.) to mitigate this risk.

We remain steadfast in recommending no congregational singing. Some churches may have small choirs or single voices participating in worship. If doing so, we encourage the use of singing masks along with appropriate distancing between the singers themselves and others. Additional guidance can be found in the faith leaders document mentioned above.

What about short responsive readings? Our advice is to limit the number and length of these selections. We also encourage you to keep the hand sanitizers handy and to consider taking temperatures as people enter the building. Additionally, consider asking people to self-monitor and actively review screening questions about exposure to COVID-19 prior to attending any events at the church (see the NCDHHS document for specific guidance on screening).

We'd also like to offer suggestions about other efforts to consider as you move forward.

Have you done a congregational survey? Two of our churches represented on the task force have done just that. You might consider asking questions such as –

- Have you been fully vaccinated? If not, do you anticipate being vaccinated, and when.
- Which of the following opportunities would you likely participate in over the next six months? 1) Virtual Learning and Worship Activities, 2) In-Person Learning and Worship Gatherings – outdoor, 3) In-Person Learning and Worship Gatherings – indoor.
- Are you comfortable with in-person worship, provided that all appropriate community health and safety measures are employed (i.e., masks, physical distancing, fresh air exchange, hand sanitizer available, service adjustments for contact precautions)?
- If you are not comfortable with in-person worship yet, will you continue to make use of the worship service online?
- What factors would be necessary for you to return to in person outdoor activities?
- What factors would be necessary for you to return to in person indoor activities?

We also encourage Sessions to create a document of expectations for participation. Content could include noting that all persons should be masked, that non-family units be physically distanced, etc. This puts forth a united front of clear expectations rather than requiring one or two people to fall into the role of building police.

You may also want to consider plans for seating in your sanctuary that preserve physical distancing such as taping off pews and indicating seating locations. This should also include training your ushers to help people enter and exit while maintaining adequate spacing. Informal visiting before or after services should occur outside and at distance while masked.

Please know that the end of the pandemic will not mean a return to the way things were before March of 2020. There is a portion of the population that will want to continue tuning in to worship rather than turning out in the sanctuary. We need to be aware of this reality and plan accordingly. And as offered in our March 17th letter, resources exist in the presbytery to assist with this.

We recognize how hard this past year has been, not only for congregation members, but for our pastors and church leaders as well. We, too, long for the day when COVID-19 precautions aren't in the forefront of our minds. And we recognize the need for clergy to have a safe place for collegial support (checking in

with one another, supporting one another and praying with and for one another). To that end, Revs. Paul Sink and Kyle Goodman are inviting pastors to a masked and physically distanced gathering on Thursday afternoon, May 13th, at 4:00 p.m. at Jamestown Presbyterian Church's Picnic Shelter for a "Salem Clergy Care and Share." So Kyle and Paul know how many colleagues to expect, please indicate your interest at <https://forms.gle/XQSMzoZG2QnFXEBw5>. Please do so early so that we may manage our numbers and plan subsequent sessions as needed.

You remain in our concern and in our hearts.

Blessings –

Rev. Dr. Barbara A. Smith
Transitional General Presbyter

Rev. Paul Sink
Taylorsville Presbyterian Church and
Salem Presbytery Moderator

Rev. Dr. Kyle Goodman
Alamance Presbyterian Church

Rev. Kathy Beach
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