



May 18, 2021

Grace Family,

We are living through the last week of Easter. We began the Easter season hearing how the resurrection of Christ changed everything. As winter gave way to spring, we have seen glimpses of this new life all around us, affording the ability to spend more time enjoying God's beloved creation.

Of course, we have all been enduring a *proverbial* winter, too, in which a pandemic has loomed over our lives, making everything feel colder and dreary. Yet new life is breaking through in this pandemic. In this season, we have been the recipients of God's grace, extended to us through the miracles of modern medical science. We have three vaccines - widely and readily available - and their efficacy is allowing us to return to the fuller lives we have missed. Today almost 40% of our state (and almost 60% of our country) has received at least one vaccine shot. Vaccines are making it possible to do so much more, and I am happy to report that effect extends to our congregational life as well.

In the survey recently conducted at Grace, we received 120 responses that reflected vaccine progress, current impact of our safety precautions, and which steps forward would give our members confidence, encouraging them to participate in ministry in-person once more. I am overjoyed to report that over 90% of those who responded said they had been vaccinated! While not a complete measure of every single parishioner, the sample size suggests that at Grace we are well ahead of the national average and even double the average of our state. Thank you to those who have been able to take this important action that serves to benefit yourselves and everybody else, too.

Of course, not all have been vaccinated - not all *can* be. Immunocompromised people may be unable to receive the vaccine. At this time, the vaccines have only been approved for children beginning at age 12. This means that, as a congregation, we cannot pretend to enjoy the same level of protection as if every member was vaccinated. As a congregation, we cannot simply move forward as though circumstances were the same for all. Therefore, Council is taking a measured approach to our return, one that will grow with time and become more expansive as we continue to learn more about what it means to be church together while the level of risk is so different for some of us.

In the pages that follow, you will see our plan for the coming weeks and months. This plan is the result of recommendations from several committees, public health agencies, our Bishop, and the measures that were widely accepted by the survey responses we received. We are continuing to make our decisions as a result of faithful discernment of God's will and God's continuously unfolding gift of scientific insight.

(continued on the next page)

In the coming days, we will be easing several of the limitations we have imposed on ourselves during the pandemic. Worship will still include masks for now, but signups are less important. Communion will be distributed in the Sanctuary once again, though not yet by kneeling at the altar rail. The music of the liturgy and hymns will return, though the science of congregational singing is still unclear, which means we will entrust our sung prayers to only a handful of voices for a while longer. These and other changes are all intended to be stepping stones; none of them are permanent. Please be sure to read all of the pages that follow this introductory letter carefully, that way we all have a sense of the path before us.

As Pastor Rachel said in her sermon on Sunday, the pace of Grace's return to a full schedule of ministry activities will be too slow for some and too fast for others. Our congregation's leadership recognizes that finding a singular approach that appeals equally to all of us is simply beyond our reach and the survey responses are proof of that point. So, since pleasing everyone is not something we can achieve, we can be all the more certain in our actual goal: pleasing God.

We are taking an approach that values the insights of many voices, but the aim is fidelity to God's will. We believe that God is calling Grace to continue to preserve life without allowing self-preservation to become an idol. Or to say it another way, we remain committed to pursuing Grace's mission with an eye towards safety, while realizing that we can never be *completely* safe. God calls us to live our faith boldly, and for many months we have been bold in our efforts to maintain a reasonably safe environment. In the months to come, as the dangers presented by this pandemic subside, we will be called to exercise bold faith by trusting God's gift of science and returning to the community where God is calling us to be.

As we move forward, we ask for your patience, your help, and your trust. Grace's ministry is multifaceted and will not easily resume all its activities at the same time. We will 'get there' but not overnight and we will be sure to provide updates along the way. As before, we will need your help to get things going again. We will need you to help us respect our common guidelines, lending a hand where possible and being gracious with one another. Finally, we need your trust. Whether or not you think the approach outlined in the next couple of pages is the one you would have crafted, trust that God will work good through it. God uses imperfect people to do the work of the Kingdom, and we need to trust that the same applies to imperfect approaches.

I am greatly encouraged that we are taking these steps forward together. We are finally starting to build some momentum in the journey to a fuller in-person ministry, and not just because we are tired of being cautious, but because the conditions of this pandemic really are improving!

As you review the plan that follows, please understand that things can change if circumstances require changes. And, if you have any questions, ask away! We want everyone to understand what we are doing, in addition to knowing why.

Let us be hopeful - and faithful - as together we prepare to celebrate Pentecost, and the continuing work that the Holy Spirit is doing through all of us here at Grace.

Peace in Christ,
Pastor Gregg Hoffman

UPDATES: Returning with Grace

Starting on Pentecost (May 23):

1. Worship services will continue to be accessible online. The format and appearance of these experiences will continue to evolve as new equipment is installed and new approaches are implemented. The ultimate goal for online worship is live streaming the worship that takes place in the Sanctuary each week, but we are not yet capable of offering this access. We hope to know more in the next several weeks.
2. Masks will continue to be required in the building for worship and fellowship events, regardless of vaccination status. We will revisit this matter in June, following further study and recommendations.
3. Worship services in the Sanctuary will include hymnody and liturgy, though singing will be limited to a soloist or small ensemble (these singers will have been fully vaccinated).
 - At first, we will start with just one hymn per worship service, but will plan to expand the number of hymns in two-week increments, provided that vaccinations continue to increase and the adverse impact by the virus continues to decrease.
 - The factors influencing the possibility of full congregational singing continue to be studied and discussed by committees and leadership. Decisions on this subject are important and will be made at a later time.
4. The need to sign up in order to attend worship will cease.
 - Instead, we will request that all attendees complete a ‘tear and share’.
 - For visitors, we will require contact information on their ‘tear and share’.
5. Communion will be distributed in the Sanctuary during the worship service.
 - Communion will be received at the head of the center aisle, with parishioners standing.
 - The pastors will no longer wear gloves.
6. Social distancing in the Sanctuary will be reduced to every other pew, and will be further reduced over time as attendance increases, provided that vaccinations continue to increase and the adverse impact by the virus continue to decrease.
7. Those who attend worship in-person may gather in the Fellowship Hall following worship services. Masks will continue to be required.
 - Food will not be a component of our Hospitality at first, but will return later.

8. Children's in-person Sunday School will not resume until the Fall.
 - This will continue to be studied over the summer and additional recommendations will be sought.
9. Adult Sunday School (Confirmation and older) may resume meeting indoors, provided that all class meetings are scheduled with the Church Office beforehand.
10. Committees may meet indoors, provided that all meetings are scheduled with the Church Office beforehand.
 - Committees are responsible for making possible it possible for some of their members to attend in-person meetings via Zoom, if some members do not yet feel comfortable attending meetings in-person (pastors will help facilitate this).
 - Those who attend committee meetings must be masked, unless all present have been fully vaccinated; if all present have been fully vaccinated, no masks are required.
 - These restrictions are the same for other small groups and teams.
11. Outreach programs can be pursued, provided that the necessary volunteers communicate their willingness to participate in-person in advance of any dates being scheduled.
 - Example: Hunger Outreach could resume its function, provided that the necessary volunteers communicate their commitment to supporting its mission with their help. We do not want to start our programs scrambling for volunteers who may feel conflicted about helping in-person at this time.
 - Those who participate in outreach programs must be masked, unless all present have been fully vaccinated; if all present have been fully vaccinated, no masks are required.
 - More discussion is needed regarding Family Promise, particularly regarding the families who would be staying at Grace, requirements for Grace volunteers, etc.
12. Outside groups may begin to meet again - provided that they commit to following the same protocols regarding masks - and will assume responsibility for contact tracing, as well as responsibility for informing the church office if one of their members has tested positive for the virus. As before, all coordination and decisions regarding outside groups are made at the staff level.
13. Council will evaluate these limitations further at its June meeting and continue to discern the next steps we will take together as a congregation.