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**SUBJECT: Resuming In-House Worship**

**DATE: August 24 ,2020**

**GREETINGS, BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST**:

We imagine that it is the understatement of our lifetime to say that 2020 has certainly not gone the way that any of us would have ever imagined when it began. We indeed find ourselves in need of a deep, growing relationship with Jesus as much now as ever. Isn’t it so good that He makes the covenant of His presence with us numerous times through the Scriptures! May we *know* AND *feel* His presence increasingly.

As many of you know, the Holston Conference of the United Methodist Church made the decision on March 13th to suspend worship and other in-house activities for all churches across the conference due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since that initial announcement, there was a limited reopening allowed; however, even that was also recently suspended due to the rising number of positive cases and deaths in Hamilton County as well as in many other counties within the Conference.

During the closure, our Ministry and Administrative Teams, led by the Reopening Leadership Team (RLT), have developed a detailed “Resuming In-House Worship” Plan, following very closely all the guidelines issued by the CDC and Holston Conference. That plan must be approved by the District Superintendent, and that plan will ensure that when we are able to open, we can do so safely and faithfully for all members of our Church Family. **You should have recently received a very short One-Call survey on reopening. Thank you for faithfully taking the time to respond to this necessary survey.**

During the closure period, our Staff has been very busy providing an expanded virtual worship opportunity for our congregation on the website and Facebook, as well as virtual activities for Kid’s and Youth, including a virtual-VBS, as well as for some small groups. We have continued limited outreach activities, such as providing access to food resources through the Food Bank, meals for the families of our kids and youth during the summer, and backpacks for students returning to class. Throughout this period, you have remained faithful in your financial support making this all possible, and we truly thank you.

**WHAT DOES THE PLAN CALL FOR?**

 Immediately prior to resuming in-house worship, the Sanctuary, Narthex, Connector, and Bathrooms will be thoroughly cleaned and sanitized by a commercial contractor and by cleaning teams headed by the Trustees. In addition, an appropriate supply of masks, hand sanitizer, hand wipes, thermometers, and cleaning materials has already been purchased and will be available for distribution and use when needed.

 When we resume in-house worship, we will provide one service, beginning at 10:30 A.M., with limited capacity. That capacity will be increased in stages depending on our actual experience. To attend, we must all wear masks, remain spatially distanced, maintain good health practices including a basic health check on entry, and ensure that the spaces being used are sanitized before and after each use. A Welcoming Team will greet you, perform a brief health check, and record attendance as required by the Conference. Cleaning Teams will complete the sanitizing steps.

A few additional differences that you will notice:

* The choir and congregation will not be singing in the early stages.
* Special procedures for taking our offering will be in place.
* Entry and exit access will be limited to the doors in the Narthex.
* Families will be asked to sit together, and a Nursery will not be provided.
* And, initially the plan does not call for resuming in-house Sunday School classes or other in-house small group activities.

We will continue to provide virtual worship by live streaming the service, and some groups will continue to meet virtually as well until we are able to open other in-house ministry activities. We have acquired an FM transmitter to provide access in our parking lot to the live in-house service for those who would like to take advantage of that option.

**WHO SHOULD REMAIN AT HOME:**

 Since there is a mask requirement for everyone attending, certain groups should plan to worship virtually until such time that it is considered safe for them to resume attending the in-house service. Those groups include children two and under; individuals who have traveled outside the country recently; individuals 65 and older living with a high-risk family member or who have high-risk health conditions themselves, including breathing issues with or without masks; and individuals who are currently exhibiting symptoms or are ill, have been exposed to, or have tested positive for COVID-19. If you do not have access to the internet and would like to receive a recording of the service, please contact the Church Office (423-892-2257).

**WHEN CAN WE OPEN?**

 We will be able to resume the in-house worship with the phased-in approach once the District Superintendent and the Conference have confirmed that a more acceptable level of risk for the spread has been attained within Hamilton County.

**WHAT’S NEXT?**

 Once we resume in-house worship, each ministry team will determine when it would be appropriate to begin phasing in in-house activities for their area. They will follow all existing Conference guidelines for ensuring that those activities will provide a safe and healthy environment for the participants and their families. We will also expand opportunities for small groups to continue to meet virtually, and our Communication Team is working tirelessly to implement these new environments for discipleship at all age levels. Our Visitation Teams will continue to expand their outreach especially to those who are unable (or unwilling) to attend an in-house worship service when we resume.

 **For the plan to function effectively and safely we will need additional volunteers to staff our Welcoming and Cleaning Teams. Volunteers will be assigned to rotating teams for each Sunday and you will receive prior training in your specific role. Please sign up on our website (stjohnumc.org/infocentral) or contact the Church Office (423-892-2257) if you are willing to volunteer for one of these Teams or would like more information about what is involved.**

 We will keep you informed as to any changes to the plan, its provisions, or timing. We have added a page on our website dedicated to all updates regarding reopening - https://stjohnumc.org/reopening. In the meantime, we ask that you continue to pray that this pandemic can be controlled and for the continued ministry of St. John for the making disciples of Jesus Christ so that He may heal our communities physically and spiritually. We also pray that we can once again worship together in God’s house on Murray Hills Drive. In the meantime, continue to be safe and healthy and focused on continuing to love God and your neighbors.

**YOURS IN CHRIST**,

**Carl Blackburn Rick Williams**

**Pastor** **Lay Leader**