

## DEAR ST JOHN UMC FAMILY,

Today, Thursday, August 26, 2021 is my 10<sup>th</sup> day of quarantine in the guest room here at the parsonage. I tested positive for COVID on Tuesday, August 17. As my quarantine draws to a close—PRAISE JESUS...I tested negative today—I have continually asked the Lord how to be a good leader, a good friend, a good brother-in-Christ with and to you, my Kingdom Family. I thought a little real-life narrative might be helpful in putting some flesh and bones perspective on just a little of what's been going on.

On Tuesday, August 10<sup>th</sup>, we had gotten word that one of our Staff Team tested positive for COVID after having been in worship a couple of days before. Kristen had already started feeling poorly as well. We both have seasonal allergies that give us “the blahs,” stuffy noses, sometimes headaches, etc., so we just let it ride for a day. But by the time Thursday rolled around, Kristen just wasn't feeling well, and I learned that my Kingdom Brother with COVID had 2 more in his household who had tested positive.

Normally, I'm up at the Church about 6am on Thursday mornings, getting the sanctuary ready for a small group of guys—who trickle in at about 7am each week—for a beautiful time of individual prayer in the company of Kingdom brothers. But that Thursday, my buddy, Luther Allin, opened up the sanctuary so that I could go with Kristen to take Lily to her first day of 5<sup>th</sup> Grade. By the time Kristen and I returned to the church from taking Lily to school, Kristen was feeling even worse. We both decided that a COVID test was probably a good idea. Kristen tested positive and I tested negative. In the midst of “contact tracing,” we began hearing from others who had also tested positive. And, then others went to get tested, some resulting positive, but most negative. I think there were somewhere around 8 of our St John Community who had tested positive within a little over a week.

Of course, we actually have no way of knowing if any of these folks had COVID during worship on August 8. I had, however, already made arrangements for someone to bring the Good News of Jesus to our Kingdom Community on Sunday, August 15 (so that I could caravan with Madi back to Jackson, TN for the beginning of her final year at Union University). Since almost 50% of our Staff Team were COVID positive by this point (Staff who are pivotal through their weekly responsibilities in helping Worship to happen), and through consultation with our District Superintendent, Reed Shell, we decided that Virtual Worship was the wise way to go. (For those of you who joined St. John online that Sunday morning, I'm sure you would agree that it was great Sunday worship!)

Because Kristen had been COVID positive for 4 days, I decided that I needed to help get Madi to Jackson, unload her belongings as quickly as possible and then drive right back to Chattanooga that Sunday night. By Tuesday morning, I was feeling really rough. I tested positive for COVID that afternoon at about 3:30. With several of our Staff Team still in the throws of COVID, we decided that we should stay with Virtual Worship for this past week as well. And, again, if you are joining us online when you aren't able to be in-person, you were no doubt blessed this past Sunday by our Praise Team and a super-solid Gospel word from our Kingdom Brother, Nate Lowe.

Praise Jesus, Madi, Camden & Lily have remained COVID negative. Unfortunately, 6 family members—of 3 of the families who had previously tested positive—are now also COVID positive. This brings us back to my prayer, asking the Lord how to lead well in the midst of this crazy COVID season. Yesterday, we asked our REOPENING LEADERSHIP TEAM to help us in this discernment process. Here is a summary from the responses.

1. Our goal all along has been to keep the staff and congregation safe and healthy as much as possible. Until this recent outbreak, we were not made aware of any incidence of someone attending an in-person gathering who subsequently became ill due to COVID as a result of that attendance.
2. Since the beginning of August, the number of active cases, hospitalizations, and deaths in Hamilton County have steadily risen and are currently above pre-vaccine levels. Those impacted include both those who were unvaccinated and those who were fully vaccinated. This variant seems to have more impact on young adults and children and, in some ways, also seems to be more easily spread and more potent than the initial strains.

3. The reason we recently went to all virtual gatherings was that several members of the staff, their families, and at least one member of the congregation tested positive, possibly from contact within a recent service, and have since been experiencing varying degrees of illness. Positive COVID cases now includes people in our Kingdom family whose ages range from 6 years old to folks in their late 70's, early 80's.
4. **WE WILL, THEREFORE REMAIN IN VIRTUAL MODE UNTIL AT LEAST THE SUNDAY FOLLOWING LABOR DAY (SEPTEMBER 12) WITH NO IN-PERSON GATHERINGS DURING THE INTERIM PERIOD.**
5. The RLT will continue to monitor the situation in Hamilton County as well as within our Kingdom Community, making adjustments to scheduling of in-person gatherings should conditions improve over the period. We will keep you posted on the process and any changes.

Thank you for your patience, understanding, prayers and care for each other! Above all, as John Wesley is often credited, ***“Do no harm, and stay in love with God.”***

**LOVE, JOY, PEACE & HOPE!**

*Pastor Carl*