

June 9, 2020

From your Healthy Church Team:

In mid-May, Bishop Sharma Lewis convened a Back to In-Person Worship Workgroup of the Virginia Conference to provide a detailed plan for reopening in-person church services. In addressing that workgroup, Bishop Lewis said “For some time, we will be living with the impact of COVID-19. Therefore, we are planning to resume in-person worship gradually and with great care.”

The plan for resuming in-person worship is based upon John Wesley’s 3 Simple Rules:

- Do No Harm—seek to ensure that no one will be endangered or placed at unnecessary risk
- Do Good—seek to do all the good we can to others, spreading God’s love, not harm, by submitting ourselves to Spirit-led self-discipline
- Stay in Love with God—we long for the return to in-person worship as one of the most important means of staying in love with God. And in order to offer this precious means of grace in the safest possible way, we have relied on the best wisdom we can glean from medical, church, governmental, and legal resources. Even when moving to more moderate restrictions, regional outbreaks may require some or all of our churches to return to more severe restrictions. Based upon the severity of an outbreak, District Superintendents may use their discretion in delaying implementation of a stage until conditions allow.

On May 22nd, our District Superintendent, Dave Rochford, held two Zoom teleconferences with representatives of our District churches to discuss the guidelines from the Conference’s Back to In-Person Worship Plan. The three-phased plan provides mandatory rules and protocols for the various stages. We are currently in Stage 1, in which each church is to create a Healthy Church Team, which will provide advice and counsel to the Lead Clergy and the Chairs of Trustees, Church Council, and S/PPRC. In Stage 1, churches have the option of conducting Drive-in or On-line/Conference call services. A few “Pioneer Churches” will conduct in-person services with limited attendance and significant restrictions during this phase to provide the District with lessons learned to help inform implementation of subsequent phases. Our Main Street Church leadership has elected to continue On-line services during this stage.

Stage 2 requirements for in-person worship will involve adding more Pioneer Churches and Churches with 50 or less in membership. During this phase, there will still be significant limitations on in-person services, including a requirement for pre-registration of attendees, restrictions on worship activities and who may attend, and new logistical requirements for signage, cleaning, etc., that will require both resources and additional volunteers under the age of 65. The start date for this stage has not yet been announced by the Bishop.

Stage 3 will be the first stage that will permit a return to in-person services similar to what we enjoyed prior to the COVID 19 pandemic, and will use “The New Normal Protocol”—more on what that means below. The timeline for Stage 3 is to be determined by the Bishop, and will be subsequent to the Governor’s announcement that the Commonwealth is entering into Virginia’s Phase 3. At this time, our Main Street Church Council has determined that it will probably be best for our congregation to plan to

resume in-person worship during Stage 3. The full details regarding these stages and their requirements are available in the “Handbook for Local Churches” at www.vaumc.org.

According to the Handbook, “In Stage 3, once there is no evidence of a COVID-19 rebound for a sustained period of time, there will no longer be a capacity limit on in-person worship services. Thus, all churches will be invited to open under any prevailing public health protocols. Heightened cleaning and disinfection, along with some physical distancing, will still be required as per civic guidelines. Church programming will not return to normal, either, as restrictive practices will still guide certain celebrations and ministries. During this time, the Conference will continue to assess the pandemic’s impact and continue prayerful discernment of its future ministry.”

In other words, the New Normal Protocol will allow us to return to in-person fellowship, but with the use of guidelines that will balance our need for personal connection with sustainment of public health and protection of those among us who may be particularly vulnerable to communicable illnesses. The main changes you are most likely to see with the New Normal will include:

- Continuation of the Healthy Church Team
- Anyone who is sick must stay at home
- Face covering is optional for in-person worship
- Signage at the entrance will meet requirements of Federal or State guidance on COVID-19, as applicable
- Signage with public health reminders, if any, and options other than in-person worship
- Congregational singing and choirs may be limited based upon current health guidance at the time
- More use of projected digital words for Worship Elements (with less reliance on paper)
- Handshakes or hugs are optional and voluntary moderate social distancing preferred
- Extra cleaning of high touch areas
- Continuation of on-line worship availability for all and the most vulnerable population

As you can see, Stage 3 guidelines are not very detailed at present, and it is unknown when we will be able to enter this stage. The Conference plan is to monitor progress through Stages 1 and 2, learning “what works, what doesn’t work, and what needs improvement, in order to tailor better-suited protocol details for Stage 3 closer to the time we enter (it).” Meanwhile, the Healthy Church Team will continue to monitor National, State and Conference information and guidance, and will periodically update our Main Street Church leadership and the congregation on developments and recommendations.