

Update from Council on COVID Safety Protocols – May 18, 2021

Grace and peace to you all,

Last week the CDC dramatically changed their guidelines for COVID limitations and the Governor followed suit with a new Executive Order which removed the mask mandate and physical distancing requirements in North Carolina. This is a dramatic shift in philosophy in how to mitigate COVID-19 and work toward moving us out of the pandemic.

Prior to this, the CDC recommendations and Governor's Executive Orders treated everyone the same regardless of their risk factors or vaccination status, and they created a set of limitations that would keep everyone as safe as possible. This new shift in philosophy moves the responsibility of keeping the most vulnerable safe from everyone, to just those who are most vulnerable.

As we understand it, the most vulnerable people in our community fall into at least 4 categories:

(1). Those who have not yet been able to access or complete the 6-week vaccination process. On April 7th, the Governor cleared all restrictions of access to the vaccine for anyone 16 years or older. Last week, children ages 12-16 were allowed to begin receiving vaccines. It is likely to be several months before those 12 and under can be vaccinated.

(2). Those who do not have access to a vaccine. This primarily includes children under the age of 12, as we are still awaiting FDA approval of a vaccine for this group.

(3). Those who are immune compromised or have other complicating health factors. Immune compromised members of our community, even with a vaccine, still carry a greater risk of severe illness from COVID. Some people can not receive the vaccine because of other complicating health factors.

(4). Those who are choosing not to access the vaccine at this time. Despite compelling evidence of the effectiveness of the vaccine in limiting illness and the spread of COVID, some people are hesitant or resistant to receiving a vaccination at this time.

The Council met on Monday evening for almost 3 hours. We discussed these topics, reviewed local and state-wide COVID and vaccination statistics, the research that the CDC recommendations are based on, and considered the next faithful step in our gradual re-opening process. Overall, we are encouraged about our progress and are pleased to have heard from so many members that they have been vaccinated. There really is much to celebrate!

Next Steps: In light of all of this information, the Council decided to take some important steps forward. Some will consider these steps too minor, while others will feel that we need to continue to exercise more caution. We know that there is no way to make everyone happy, but we feel like these new policies are the next right step for our community of faith.

Masks: The Council has decided to continue to require everyone to wear masks indoors for worship and for all indoor group gatherings of more than 12 people. Masks are highly recommended for all indoor group gatherings of 12 or fewer people as long as all the participants are 16+ years. Our rationale for continuing our mask requirement for large gatherings at church is to allow more time for those who have not yet been vaccinated to complete their vaccination process and to protect those who cannot yet get the vaccine. We feel like it is in the best interest of all of our congregational members to allow more time for younger adults and adolescents to complete their vaccination processes.

Pre-Registration for Services: Effective Sunday May 23, we will no longer assign seats for worship. However, everyone must pre-register by the Thursday prior to the Sunday they are planning to attend worship. This will help us determine the number of seats and communion elements needed. But, families will be able to choose their own seats when entering the sanctuary. Those attending should arrive 10-15 minutes early to check-in. Everyone will enter the building through the side narthex door. Masks are required to enter the sanctuary.

Holy Communion: The most exciting news is that we will begin serving Holy Communion on Pentecost Sunday, May 23rd. We will serve Communion at the head of the aisle on one side of the sanctuary at a time. People will be invited forward by family with their masks on. After receiving both the bread and wine (or grape juice), congregants may remove their masks briefly to consume the sacrament and then replace their masks prior to returning to their seats.

Group Gatherings: Masks are required for all gatherings of more than 12 people. Masks are highly recommended for groups with 12 or fewer people of at least 16+ years. In groups of 12 or fewer, food and drinks may be served. Masks should be worn when not actively eating or drinking.

On the next page, you will find a full listing of all the new changes. Please take just a few moments to read through those details.

Finally, I think it is important to realize that we are entering a new phase of our COVID response societally. As a wider community, we need to work to de-stigmatize both wearing masks AND not wearing masks. We are living in an environment where people are sometimes going to be wearing masks and sometimes not wearing masks. Each person needs to make decisions about their own risk, remembering there is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Therefore, we need to respect each other's choice to wear a mask, or to not wear a mask, in situations in which masks are not required. Similarly, since we know that children under the age of 12 are not yet eligible for vaccination, special care should be taken when interacting with children, especially indoors.

We have made some remarkable progress and there is a lot to celebrate now, as we also grieve the many losses we have all experienced over the past year. On a personal note, I continue to be thankful for the thoughtfulness and energy that all of our Council Members put into each set of these decisions. Council members are regularly reading articles and checking COVID dashboards. They have taken seriously their calling to lead our congregation through this unprecedented time. I give thanks for their faithfulness to this challenging calling, and for their shared leadership in the life of our congregation.

In Grace,
Pastor Steve

SUMMARY OF CHANGES TO COVID SAFETY PROTOCOLS AT GRACE

Overall Policies:

- Everyone is required to wear masks indoors for worship and any group gathering of more than 12 people.
- Everyone is highly encouraged to wear masks for indoor activities for groups of 12 or fewer, limited to ages 16+.
- Everyone is encouraged to wear masks for outdoor activities.

Sunday morning gatherings:

- We will continue our pre-registration process, but allow folks to choose their own seats from the available pews.
- The church building will be opened 15 minutes prior to worship to allow for an orderly check-in process.
- Everyone will enter through the side Narthex door.
- Ushers will resume handing out bulletins outside; they will wear masks.
- Offering plates will not be passed during the offering time. The offering plate will be in the Narthex to be used either while entering or exiting the sanctuary.
- We will adjust seating availability based on registrations, allowing, when needed, seating in every other pew. This would accommodate an estimated 125 people for worship.
- We will not yet resume coffee hour or in-person Sunday School. Please note that Pastor Steve continues to lead a Sunday School class online at 8:30am on Sunday mornings and that participants in this class have been able to attend both Sunday school and in-person worship.
- **Singing:** We will allow a group of up to 8 singers in singer masks to sing the hymns each Sunday. The congregation is asked not to sing at this time. Council will continue to evaluate the possibility of congregational singing in the future.
- **Communion:** We will begin serving Holy Communion on Pentecost Sunday (May 23rd). We will serve Communion at the head of the aisle on one side of the sanctuary at a time. Those participating in communion will be invited forward, one family at a time, with their masks. After receiving both the bread and wine (or grape juice), congregants may remove their masks briefly to consume the sacrament and then replace their masks prior to returning to their seats.
- **Lay Worship Leaders:** Lay Readers and Assisting Ministers will help lead the worship service with Pastor Steve. Assisting Ministers and Lay Readers may remove masks for readings and prayers.

Online Worship:

- High quality online worship will continue to go live each Sunday by 8:30am at least through August.
- We will have another LIVE online Communion worship service on Wednesday, May 19th @ 7pm. We will offer at least one more online Communion worship service in June. Council will evaluate at the June meeting if online communion services will continue or not.

Other In-Person Activities at Church:

- We will continue to require accurate registration for all events, with the exception of AA.
- The Fellowship Hall will continue to be our primary meeting space, however the Chapel, Parlor, and Lower Fellowship Hall, may now be used for internal and external group gatherings. Each space will need a cleaning block of time between meetings.
- Food and drinks may be served at in-person gatherings of 12 persons or fewer, with the exception of any indoor events including children under the age of 16. Masks must be worn when not actively eating or drinking.
- The choir can practice in-person, without social distancing requirements, in the Choir loft. All singers are required to wear singing masks while practicing.

Church Office:

- The church office will continue to be open on a limited schedule, as staff members balance in-person and remote work. Staff members will continue to be able to be reached through their church extensions when working remotely, and staff members continue to be responsive on email. All Staff will be masked when interacting with people inside the church buildings.