



First United Methodist Church

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Many Gifts, One Spirit

Rev. Hyeunmee Kang, Pastor

May 10, 2021

Dear First United Methodist of Decorah Church Family,

Over the past year the COVID-19 pandemic has created significant changes in how we have been able to worship. It was *painful* to close down the church building and ask you to worship from home. The Church leadership and staff have worked diligently to allow all of us to worship from our homes, but our hearts yearn for the time when we can start worshipping together again. Throughout the pandemic, our Crisis Operations Team has been monitoring information to begin developing a plan and timeline for re-opening our Church. The Crisis Operations Team includes Pastor Mee, Nancy Ruen, Don Stromseth, Jayme Folkedahl, Deb TeKippe and Andy Van Der Maaten.

Why we closed the church:

At the start of the pandemic, COVID-19 was a new disease with no preventative vaccine or defined treatment. In order to best learn about the disease and health factors resulting from it we have monitored the Iowa Conference, CDC (Center for Disease Control), IDPH (Iowa Department of Public Health), and Winneshiek County Public Health as resources to help guide and direct our decision-making process. Reports and ensuing Proclamations from the Governor of Iowa have also set guidelines which we are directed to follow.

Factors to consider as we re-open the church:

We have learned that COVID-19 is a highly contagious virus that is primarily spread from person to person in respiratory droplets that are spread through coughing, sneezing or talking to someone who is 6 feet or less from you. **Effective methods of preventing the development and spread of this virus involve getting vaccinated, wearing a mask, following safe “social distancing practices” and practicing frequent handwashing.** *Based on what we now know, those at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19 are as follows:*

- People who are 65 or older
- People of all ages who have underlying medical conditions such as:
 - People with chronic lung disease or moderate to severe asthma
 - People who have serious heart conditions
 - People who are immunocompromised (e.g., cancer treatment, bone marrow or organ transplant, immune deficiencies, and prolong use of corticosteroids or other immune weakening medications).
 - People with severe obesity (Body Mass Index (BMI) of 40 or higher)
 - People with diabetes
 - People with chronic kidney disease (undergoing dialysis)
 - People with liver disease

This list is NOT meant to be all inclusive, but rather to help guide in decision making.

Our Church leadership and Staff are doing everything we can to provide a safe environment as we start gathering together again for worship. **Our timeline and plan are outlined below**, along with an outline of the protocol we encourage you to abide by when you do return. Please read it carefully and think it through. We hope it will help you personally decide when you feel you can safely return to worship. The decision of whether or not to attend onsite church services is yours and we understand and will respect your decision. The heart and goal of this plan is safety for all!

These have been challenging times, and the Administrative Council and Staff are so very thankful for your patience, support and encouragement during this time. Unity of Spirit is a beautiful thing and we are so appreciative of how you have handled this whole time of major adjustments! We continue to ask for your patience and support as we "Return to Church"!

We are encouraged by the number of members of our community and congregation who have received their vaccines. The benefit of the vaccinations is reflected in the relatively low level of new Covid-19 cases in Winneshiek County. We believe this may be a time to proceed cautiously to reopen. The Iowa Conference describes this as:

Level 2: Yellow Light Status: Cautionary Return. We anticipate this will cover a number of months. As the IAUMC, we want to "Do Good" as restrictions are lifted. This means a gradual return to gatherings and doing so in a cautionary manner. Even as we enter Yellow Light Status, high-risk individuals, who have not been vaccinated, should practice sheltering in place. This would include people over 65, those with underlying conditions or other vulnerabilities, those who have tested positive, and those who have been exposed to someone COVID-19 positive in the last 14 days. This includes staff, volunteers, parishioners, and guests.

TIMELINE: Sunday Church Services in June:

June 6th- *Our morning service will be held at 9:00 AM. Communion will be offered in prefilled individual (disposable) fellowship cups.* This service will also be available for attendance via Zoom. This service will be recorded for broadcast the following Sunday. Those attending this service will be asked to follow the protocol we are proposing for services we plan to offer the rest of the summer. If this protocol goes well, we will be offering the following schedule:

PROTOCOL- *These guidelines will be under the direction of the "Crisis Operations Team".*

- **We strongly suggest that people 65 and older who have not received a Covid 19 vaccine watch from home.** You are the group most at risk and we are genuinely concerned about the increased risk to your health in a group setting such as this.
- **We ask that anyone who has any symptoms of illness PLEASE STAY HOME!** Also, if you know that you have been exposed to anyone who has been ill or who has been diagnosed with COVID-19, **PLEASE STAY HOME!**
- We ask you to **only** enter and exit the sanctuary through either the main entrance (east door) to Broadway Street or the east door to Court Street. If you need to use the lift, you are welcome to use the west door on Broadway Street.
- Please pick up after yourself.
- We will have sanitizer stations outside the doors and the entry doors will be braced open.
- **Masks will be required.** Masks will be available for those who do not have them.
- **There will be NO Nursery or Sunday School!** If you need to leave the sanctuary during the service, you may go to the Fellowship Hall. We ask you to please practice social distancing while in that area.
- We will have social distancing lines marked by the sanitizer stations and will provide guidance to control

the flow through these stations and into the church.

- We will need to keep the flow of people moving in order to practice good social distancing.
- If you desire to have coffee at church, you will need to bring your own coffee in your own container.
- The restrooms in the choir room will be available but we discourage usage of them.
- The education unit, kitchen and balcony will be closed.
- There will be two empty rows between each occupied row and Crisis Operations Team members will remind people of different groupings to sit 6 feet apart in the pews.
- If more people than expected show up, we will use the balcony as an overflow area.
- We encourage members to leave the Church building immediately after worship.
- There will be no coffee fellowship in the Church. However, pursuant to recent CDC guidance, outdoor meetings of small groups of vaccinated persons without masks would be permissible (bring your own coffee).
- Custodial staff will thoroughly clean all areas prior to our next service.

We are aware that this process seems sterile and impersonal. We sincerely wish that we did not have to be so structured, but in order to offer a relatively safe environment to all who attend, this is what we need to do right now. We will miss some of the fellowship, but there will still be some personal interaction AND we will be able to worship together!!



Andrew F. Van Der Maaten
Chair, Administrative Council