

“But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to others.” -1 Cor. 8:9

Dear Members and Friends of United Church of Chapel Hill:

After several weeks of discernment and planning with church leaders, it’s time for me to update our community about how UCCH is moving through the next phase of life with Covid-19. On April 27, our Church Council approved a revised building use policy that will go into effect on June 1 as well as plans for worship through the summer. I’d like to share with you the essential details you’ll need to participate in our community life and offer some reflections on why we feel these changes are right for this time in our life together.

HIGHLIGHTS OF RECENT COUNCIL ACTIONS

- Our digital worship services will continue through the summer.
- In addition to online worship, please join us for **in-person worship outdoors on May 23, June 20, July 11, August 8, and September 12**. La Mesa will be leading at least two of these outdoor worship experiences. Advance registration will be needed to attend these services, so please look for those invitations. We will ask that everyone wear face masks at these services.
- Beginning June 1, our building will be available during the week for in-person small group meetings. You may register to use UCCH facilities by contacting Kati Ruark (kruark@unitedchurch.org).
- Face masks are required both indoors and outdoors at United Church of Chapel Hill. However, small groups who disclose their vaccination status in covenantal discussion with one another may elect to remove their face masks once they arrive in their meeting space.

REFLECTIONS FROM PASTOR CAMERON

First let me say thank you for your prayers and support since we began this Great Dispersion on March 15, 2020. All of our ministries have found new ways to connect in the past year - frequently online, sometimes in small groups, always with love for the communities in and around our congregation. Financially, the congregation has been incredibly faithful. Your stewardship, “Step Up” gifts, and special offerings have assured that we could keep our focus on ministry rather than making hard choices.

From my point of view, March and April of this year have been the most difficult months for those of us tasked with making decisions about how to call our communities together. Before vaccines were available, there was a clear consensus that gathering of any sort was inadvisable. Now that 32% of Americans and 30% of North Carolinians are vaccinated, we are often asked to interpret conflicting advice and contemplate the needs of communities with different levels of privilege and exposure. In Orange County, the vaccination numbers are particularly impressive. The vaccination rate locally is 46% and among those older than 65, it is 84%. That is such great news! And yet, at this midway point in the vaccination campaign, we are also faced with questions of equity and fairness. We want to lean into more life-giving

communal activities even as we remember the many people in our community who are unable to participate in those activities. The “already and not yet” paradox of this moment presents new ambiguities for us to negotiate.

Although all of us wish for a return to regular community building activities, our desire to resume indoor gatherings is tempered by other pandemic realities. There are almost 2,000 cases of Covid-19 reported every day in North Carolina. This week, planned work on our church campus to restore our water retention pond is being delayed because the work crew has been sick with Covid-19. Families with children under 16 do not have access to Covid vaccines in our state. And most concerning to all of us - there is increasing evidence that vaccines are not protective to many people with compromised immune systems. Holding in tension the liberties that vaccinated people enjoy with the needs of those who aren't protected by the vaccine makes me think of Paul's instructions to the earliest Christians - urging rules for community life that make being together safe and accessible for everyone.

Almost every Monday, I meet with the leaders of faith communities around Chapel Hill to receive a public health update and to discuss how our congregations are moving through the pandemic. We have made a covenant to urge our congregations to walk in step with one another. The policies that our council approved last week are very similar to the approach of our neighbor congregations. No faith community in this collective of congregations - which includes, among others, Chapel of the Cross, University Presbyterian, St. Paul AME, and Kehilah Synagogue - currently sponsors any indoor meetings. In fact, because we have the blessings of generous outdoor space and a well-appointed building, our policies are among the most permissive in terms of gathering for worship and small group meetings.

I hope this update helps you to understand the major concerns we have as we approach the summer and consider the future. I know that some will say that our approach is too cautious at a time when the governor is loosening statewide restrictions. Still others will feel uncomfortable joining us for the activities that I have described. But I also know our community will trust the prayerful discernment so many of us have contributed to developing these plans. And I feel sure that keeping in mind the needs of those most vulnerable among us is best for the common good and in keeping with our purpose to follow Jesus.

In faith, hope, and love -

Cameron

