

COVID UPDATE

May 25, 2021

The Reentry Team has been carefully monitoring COVID infection and immunization rates, as well as the recommendations for faith communities from the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the Rhode Island Department of Health, and the New England Conference's Reentry Team. Based on the trends over the last several weeks and the updated public health guidelines, the Reentry Team recommended to the Church Council that we reopen the building for worship and for use by church and outside groups. On May 25 the Church Council voted to accept the recommendations.

The Recommendations

- Return to in-person worship in the sanctuary on Sunday, June 6, with a live stream of the service for those who choose not to attend.
- Maintain most of the safety protocols for indoor worship that were in place when we last worshiped in the sanctuary, but reduce social distancing requirement to three feet. (The guidelines are available at bit.ly/3vnbrp0 or from the church office.)
- Require mask wearing, social distancing, and ventilation whenever we gather in any group that may include non-vaccinated people (i.e., committee meetings, study groups, etc.).
- Reopen the building for use by church and outside groups effective June 6.
- Require that all spaces used be properly sanitized (wipe down tables, chairs, door knobs, railings, restrooms, etc.) after each use with a disinfectant that is known to be effective against the coronavirus. As an additional safety measure, groups will not be scheduled to use the same space within 48 hours of the last time that space was used.

What about the New CDC Recommendations for Fully Vaccinated People?

- The CDC guidance for discontinuing the use of masks and social distancing by fully immunized people is a general public health recommendation and not tailored to any particular context. The CDC states what *individuals can do*, not what *congregations should do*.
- Our congregation consists of both vaccinated and unvaccinated people (including children, those who have not yet been vaccinated, and those who have chosen not to be vaccinated). Unvaccinated people (and those who are vaccinated, but immunocompromised) continue to be at risk for infection. Dropping safety protocols such as mask wearing and social distancing puts them at greater risk. Those who are unvaccinated should also not be stigmatized by having them follow a different set of guidelines from those who are vaccinated. Therefore, regardless of vaccination status, we will **all** continue to observe safety protocols for the sake of the unvaccinated.

The Theological Rationale for these Recommendations

- Scripture is clear that we are to prioritize the needs of those who are at risk or in need. The Torah, the Prophets, the ministry of Jesus, and the practice of the early Church all point to the call to sacrificially love and provide for our neighbor.
- As the Apostle Paul reminds us, the church is one body in Christ. As such, we are no more protected than the least protected among us. God arranged the body of Christ so that "there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." (I Corinthians 12:25-26)

- In a recent update from the Conference Reentry Team, Bishop Devadhar suggested that, at this point in the pandemic, “We are on the Jericho Road.” Using the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), he warned churches that are returning to in-person worship to carefully consider whether our choices care for the vulnerable (as did the Good Samaritan) or focus only on getting to our desired destination (like the priest and the Levite who passed by on the other side of the road).
- Our concern for, and love of, neighbor is not limited to our community of faith. The requirement that outside groups follow the same safety protocols as the congregation is intended to keep **all** persons who enter our building safe. Additionally, this is the recommendation of the chancellor of the New England Conference.

Summer Worship

- We received positive feedback about outdoor worship last summer, with many requests that we continue to offer outdoor worship during the summer every year. We are recommending that 2021 summer worship take place outdoors during July and August, except if it is raining (in which case worship will take place in the sanctuary). A live stream of the service will be available.
- Current safety protocols for outdoor worship will remain in place, with these changes:
 - Congregational singing will be allowed
 - Worship bulletins (including hymns) may be distributed

Looking Ahead

- The Reentry Team is currently researching media equipment that will provide a consistently high quality live stream of worship services for those who must, or prefer to, worship from home.
- The team will continue to monitor COVID numbers and public health guidelines, with particular attention to the emergence of variant strains of the virus and data regarding vaccination effectiveness over time. Appropriate recommendations for increasing or relaxing safety protocols will be made as the situation dictates.
- As always, the Reentry Team welcomes your questions and feedback. You can contact any member of the team individually or send an email to reentry.amumc@gmail.com.

Reentry Team Members:

Matt Cedor
Lee Ann Cotta
Keith Johnson

Stacey Johnson
Johnna Kosnoff
Cindy Mauch

Joe Mazarella
Karen Oswain
Pam Thurlow
Arlene Tully