

Dear Friends in Christ:

After many months of making do without in-person gatherings, we are beginning to enter a new phase in the Covid-19 pandemic. We write to you to let you know how we foresee the coming months, and our hopes for more opportunities to gather in worship, fellowship and growth.

For the last 13 months, our Safe Operating team has met frequently to understand the public health situation and propose policies and procedures to the Church Council. At this time, we are careful to say we are not “at the end” of the pandemic, nor do we see the coming weeks as a “new normal.” However, there are signs that we can begin to do things differently than we did through the winter.

Vaccinations are proceeding across the state and country, but there is still a way to go before we reach the herd immunity that vaccines promise. We cannot assume in any open public gathering that everyone is vaccinated. Indeed, no one under age 16 is or will be for some time.

We are also continuing to see community spread, and in some cases very serious illness, from Covid-19. As of April 22, the 14-day case rate for Rice County is similar to what it was in mid-October – a rate that at that time called for all schools to move to remote learning.

Given these two factors, we are taking a gradual approach to increasing our numbers in Sunday worship in the sanctuary. Because all of us need to learn new patterns in how we interact in worship and at church, we see this going in the following stages

- Starting Sunday April 25, limited sign-ups for vaccinated individuals in worship, six feet apart and masked throughout the service. No Holy Communion or fellowship indoors.
- Starting Sunday May 16, sign-ups for vaccinated adults and their own households’ children of any age. Holy Communion and fellowship opportunities only outdoors.
- The next stage (though we don’t know yet exactly when): unvaccinated adults able to sign up.
- Some time this summer, a somewhat fuller sanctuary, still masked and with close to six feet between every household. We will continue offering Communion and fellowship opportunities outdoors as long as weather allows.
- Addition of a second service with the above restrictions.
- Holy Communion offered indoors
- Indoor fellowship hour resumes

We don’t know when we can expect these latter stages to happen. We will continue to require masks and six feet of distancing for as long as the CDC recommends it. Because we value singing together, we may require masks in worship longer than some would consider necessary. We don’t know when we will be able to have worship without first asking for sign-ups. But we do trust that at some time we will be able to return to the full and open experience of a Sunday morning again. Only then will we consider ourselves fully “re-opened.”

We also know that everyone in our community will move through the stages of returning to social activity at different speeds. And, as has always been the case, some will continue to worship with us from a distance via the radio or livestream. Please know that whatever pace you decide to go for yourself, we as a congregation will be praying with and for you.

Your Church Council