



A PANDEMIC UPDATE FROM FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

From Dr. Michael
Roberts,
Senior Pastor,
Conway FUMC



Dear FUMC Family,

Last week, our Governor, along with church leaders, laid out guidelines for faith communities and told us that many cases of Covid-19 can be traced to churches where guidelines were not being followed. In this light, I want to reiterate our commitment to cultivating a safe environment for those who choose to attend in-person worship.

At FUMC, masks are required, seating is arranged for appropriate distancing, services are 30 minutes long, and sanitizing protocols are in place. We are trusting that these protocols are keys to helping us love and care and honor one another, as we are called to do.

At the same time, I want to make you aware of some updates from Bishop Mueller and the Arkansas Conference. Concerning the possibility of suspending in-person worship, we are now being asked to make decisions based on the number of active cases and hospitalizations in our community and to follow actions of local school districts. A scale is available for active known infections for a 14-day period per 10,000 population. The scale moves from Green (0-20 active cases), to Yellow (20-29), Orange (30-49), Red (50-99), and Purple (100 or more).

As of this week, Conway is at 30 -- just in the Orange -- and has been in the yellow for several consecutive weeks. For some context, Greenbrier and Morrilton are in the green. Vilonia, Cabot, and Little Rock are in yellow. There are many communities in the red and even purple, including Bentonville, Springdale, Fort Smith, Jonesboro, and many smaller communities. Please know that if we move into the "red" we will likely suspend in-person worship. Given where we are, caution is in order. We will continue to be diligent in our safety protocols and monitor the numbers weekly. Any changes will be initially reported via our email network and Facebook page.

In the name of "protecting religious freedom," there are many examples of congregations around us that do not require masks or distancing or time limits on gatherings. In the midst of this debate, I want to add the following spiritual encouragement. In Christ, we are set free! But what does that mean? As people of faith, we are never to use our God-given freedom "as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love to be servants to one another." (Gal 5:13-15) We are free to "outdo one another in showing honor," to "practice hospitality," especially to strangers, to "associate with the lowly," and, insofar as it depends on us, to live "peaceable with all." (See Romans 12; I Peter 1:16-17; II Cor 3:17-18) I cannot find any biblical justification for promoting religious freedom with the aim of protecting our own opinions, prejudices, comfort, or right to cause public harm. That does not glorify God -- even if we have the legal freedom to do so. As we engage in debates of other understandings of religious freedom, may this higher gift of freedom to love and care for one another be our guide.

In this freedom, we must discern what is good and right and strive to act within that. That is not always easy. With the holidays approaching, the tension between worthy values is magnified. Yes, we are created to worship together and to fellowship with one another. This is how we grow in the image of Christ and learn how to love. And yes, these same values inspire us to make changes in how we do this, even when it means personal sacrifice or discomfort. This is also how we grow in the image of Christ and learn how to love.

To help with this, I hope to "see" you all in worship, either online or in-person. Especially as we enter the holidays in the midst of a pandemic, it is so important to stay connected to the One from whom all life and love flows. Please know that you are in my prayers, as you grow in the freedom you have been given, the freedom to learn how to love more fully, day by day.

Grace and Peace to you.