

July 2020

Greetings Good People of New Paltz UMC!

I bring you tidings of hope and progress.

We are all anxious to know more about when we will be able to worship in person again and what that might look like. We are now at a point where I have some information to share with you. Please bear in mind this is subject to change should there be an uptick in Covid-19 cases, if we receive new health recommendations, or by directive of the Conference.

We are blessed to have the guidance of Bishop Bickerton and his office. The protocols the NYAC has put together are so good, in fact, that health officials are advising other groups to follow the model. We are fortunate to have such leadership in these uncertain times. Especially given the strong presence our congregation members have in Conference leadership, we must be completely committed to ensuring these guidelines are strictly followed. The plans I am sharing with you do not and will not deviate from the wise counsel we have been given.

Reopening is a small word for a big project. I have assembled a Reopening Task Force, chosen for their roles in Trustees, Care Team, Missions, and Administrative Council leadership. The team is: Scott Costley, John Bautochka, Dan Ruback, Kathy Weiss, Margaret Howe, Stephanie Parsons, and Hank Vance. They are already hard at work moving us toward our **anticipated reopening date of September 13th**. I'll share with you some of what to expect when we do open the doors as well as some of what the task force will be doing between now and then. Above all, our first concern is to keep each and everyone of God's children safe and well.

When we reopen we will be strictly limited to a fraction of our church capacity, 33%. We strongly encourage anyone who is in a high risk group to continue to worship from home. Social distancing measures in the sanctuary will mean there will be a specific way to enter and exit the church, only the sanctuary, the lift and one bathroom will be open, and only those residing in a home together will be able to sit together. We may not have singing, everyone must be masked throughout the service, and there can be no socializing inside before or after church. The only option available for communion in person will be by prepackaged bread and cup. I know that is a lot to take in, and not what any of us want to hear. However, I am prayerful this gives everyone time to adjust to very different expectations.

The Task Force is working to ensure that all of our required precautions are taken. At that point, the DS will review our work and decide if we are ready to proceed. Then and only then will we be able to officially announce a firm reopening date. To receive approval means, among other things, detailed signage, a clear path of movement in and out of the sanctuary, documentation of the official number of people permitted to attend worship in person, and a protocol for taking thorough attendance in the event that we need to do contact tracing. We must deep clean the church prior to reopening and remove any and all materials that make subsequent cleaning more challenging – this includes all hymnals and Bibles. A clear plan for how we will disinfect all open spaces after every worship service must be designed, including the means to track and prove it is followed. In addition, we are guided by the Bishop, and by our own sense of mission to continue a rich online worship experience. This requires a significant amount of creative placement of equipment and use of space. I don't want to overwhelm you with details, but I do want everyone to have a clear sense of the work that must be done in the weeks ahead.

A few other very important points. The only people who may be in the church are those specifically brought in to carry out these steps. This is extremely important for several reasons, but as an example, once a room has been deep cleaned, we need to seal the room and know it has not been entered, otherwise it will need to be thoroughly disinfected again. All clergy have been instructed that, in the event a person comes to worship and is unwilling to mask, we must immediately offer a benediction and clear the church. Some of the protocols may seem inexplicable or unnecessary. I assure you, they are not. Each and every one has been and continues to be carefully and lovingly considered by a large number of well qualified people.

These are stressful and uncertain times, I know. There is much we long to lay before the altar and give up to God. Please know that no matter what is happening, each of you are my first and greatest priority. If there is any way in which I can offer spiritual or material support, no other task or commitment will keep me from you. Even if you just have questions about the content of this letter, reach out to me.

Thank you for your continued patience with the worship team and mutual support of one another throughout this strange season. We are, I believe made for such a time as this, and I have every confidence that together we will emerge from our time apart stronger and more thoroughly together than ever before.

Peace and blessings,

Pastor Jenn