

4 June 2021

New Pandemic Protocols at First Presbyterian Church

Friends in Christ:

We can't begin to tell you how joyful it has been and is to see and worship with you on Sunday mornings as we have begun to regather. This pandemic disrupted so much of life. It changed how we did so many different things.

First Presbyterian Church's leadership and congregation worked hard to make matters better from the beginning. We sought to be a part of the solution. Applying the best science available as well as our Christian theology, we suspended in-person worship for more than a year and went virtual with as many ministries as we could. When we resumed in-person activities in April we masked, distanced, and maintained appropriate capacities. These measures were less than convenient but they were the right thing to do as followers of Jesus. Our neighbors' health and well-being were at stake and we are our brother and sister's keepers. Thank you and God bless you for your faithfulness in this time of crisis.

Thankfully, medical science made vaccinations available in record time to combat the novel coronavirus. At present, slightly more than 50% of Americans are fully vaccinated; the comparable vaccination rate for Winchester is 36%. Vaccinations have resulted in significantly reduced hospitalizations and deaths.

The virus remains active and is still with us, however. We need to remain vigilant. The vaccine is now widely available to persons over the age of 12. Scientific studies conclude that vaccinated persons are only a minuscule threat to one another or unvaccinated persons. Though not zero, the risk is very minimal. However, unvaccinated persons, though not a threat to vaccinated persons, remain a threat to one another, especially when indoors in a congregant setting, not distanced and unmasked.

Given the current data, our Session, on the recommendation of its Infectious Disease Task Force and the guidance of the CDC and of Executive Order 79 from the Governor of Virginia, is relaxing its pandemic protocols effective beginning Sunday, June 6 for all church activities except for Jubilee Kitchen, which will provide dining in fellowship hall beginning July 3, and, for now, our Chancel Choir. At present and for the foreseeable future our Chancel Choir ministry will provide soloists, duets, trios, and quartets to lead music in worship.

The new protocols for vaccinated persons include:

- *Masks are optional.*
- *Social distancing is optional.*
- *Room capacities are lifted.*
- *All entrances and exits of the building are available for use.*

Persons who are not yet fully vaccinated should continue to mask and distance per CDC guidelines. We are mindful that presently children under twelve are ineligible to be vaccinated and some persons who are immunocompromised may be at risk even if vaccinated.

Personally, although we are fully vaccinated we plan to mask whenever we are in the company of children and youth under the age of twelve or anyone who we know to be immunocompromised out of an abundance of caution as well as concern for their comfort level. We encourage others to consider doing likewise as an act of welcome and hospitality.

Our Infectious Disease Task Force remains in place. They will continue to monitor public health data and provide their counsel to our Session. If there are changes in the activity of the virus in our community, our IDTF and Session will revisit our protocols and modify them as necessary.

Our 9:00 a.m. worship service in fellowship hall will continue to be live-streamed so that persons may join us virtually. We trust and know that God is with us in worship whether masked or unmasked, distanced or not and whether we worship outdoors in the parking lot, within the church building, or in our homes online. Be assured that God meets us where we are.

We know and understand that everyone will emerge from this time away with various comfort levels and risk tolerances. It is our prayer that fellow worshippers will continue to be respectful of one another's choices as we continue to resume worshipping together.

Being and doing church differently for nearly fifteen months has been an unusual season. Emerging from the pandemic will present challenges as well as exciting opportunities. We envision our congregation refocusing its efforts beyond our walls, extending additional hospitality in our immediate neighborhood, and being inviting more than we have ever been before and in ways we may not have been before. We look forward to where the Holy Spirit will lead us next in our journey as a congregation.

The church has endured arduous seasons before and prevailed. Such seasons invite us to hope anew in Christ who continues to call us to be his hands, feet, heart and voice in the world. Such seasons invite us to hope anew in Christ who sustains us as we continue to undertake his ongoing work of loving God and loving neighbor. We give thanks for all the ways God has guided us through this time and for all the ways we have continued to be Christ's body in the world even while being apart. We thank all our creative and dedicated leaders as well as church members who have been a part of protecting and loving neighbors.

We, along with the ruling elders of our congregation, are available for further conversation. We want to hear your ideas, your questions, and your concerns. We want to hear the ways you feel called to serve as we transition into a new season in our life and ministry as a congregation. We ask for your continued prayers that God would hold all of us close to God and one another and that we might have the mind of Christ as we seek to lead faithfully.

God's peace,

Dan McCoig, Pastor

Amanda Maguire Thomas, Associate Pastor