



August 4, 2021

Dear Central Family:

As most of you are aware, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) issued new guidance last week recommending the implementation of masks for vaccinated and unvaccinated persons at indoor functions for areas of substantial or high transmission, which currently includes every county in Arkansas. Late last week, Arkansas Conference Bishop Gary Mueller released a video strongly encouraging Arkansas churches to implement the new CDC guidelines and Arkansas United Methodists to get vaccinated. In addition, Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson put into place a new 60-day emergency public health declaration which was upheld by the Arkansas General Assembly this week.

Earlier this week, Central's Board of Trustees held a special meeting to review our current situation. In preparation for the meeting the Board reviewed the new CDC guidance and the direction offered by our Bishop. At the meeting, the Board was provided data and information on the state of pandemic, which showed that hospitalizations in Arkansas related to COVID were at 1,250 (about 120 short of our all-time pandemic high); 260 persons in Arkansas were on ventilators due to COVID (nearing the all-time pandemic high of 268).

The Board of Trustees also had the opportunity to hear from Dr. Allen Moseley, a member of Central UMC, who is certified in pulmonary and critical care medicine and has treated hundreds of COVID patients throughout the pandemic. Dr. Moseley shared several insightful details including that the average age of current COVID patients is now under 40; that the transmission capabilities of the Delta variant are more than three times the original variant; that our local hospitals are straining under the demands currently being placed upon them.

Based on trendlines of how the Delta variant has progressed in other countries we believe there is a strong likelihood that the peak and subsequent decline of the Delta variant may be behind us within a few months.

The church staff shared that they have heard from various members of the congregation. Opinions have been divergent in that some have indicated disappointment that the church has not already implemented enhanced safety measures while others have expressed desires to see the church refrain from taking any further action.

After careful prayerful reflection and considerable discussion, the Board of Trustees voted unanimously to implement the following policy:

- **Require masks of all persons aged five (5) and above when attending worship services. (Effective August 8, 2021)**
- **Staff, life classes and small groups may meet without masks if attendees are vaccinated. Masks will need to be utilized otherwise. (Effective August 4, 2021)**

This policy will be reviewed by the Board of Trustees within 30 days. Revisions may occur sooner if the situation warrants.

The adopted guidance will please some of you. Others will think it goes too far and some will think it does not go far enough. Regardless of your stance, we earnestly request that we all take a posture of offering grace to one another as we seek to navigate our way forward and together do our very best to continue carrying out the ministries and missions of our beloved church in *making Christ central to life for the people of Northwest Arkansas and around the world.*

We understand that there is great momentum in the church right now with the arrival of our new Senior Pastor, Rev. Vaughan, and renewed energy in our worship services, making the timing of this new policy even more unfortunate. Our hope and prayer is that we can come together in a spirit of unity and all remain engaged in the life of the church in what we believe will be a short-lived and temporary season under these renewed restrictions.

If you determine that coming to in-person worship is not your best option for now, we are blessed to be able to offer our 9:15 a.m. contemporary service and 11:00 a.m. classic service each Sunday morning live streamed through the church's website and social media channels. Numerous other classes are being offered in both virtual and hybrid formats. And we expect to be offering the new Pastor's Class at 10:00 a.m. each Sunday morning in a live stream format by Labor Day weekend when the new church-wide study, *The Story*, commences.

Serving Christ Together!!
Central UMC Board of Trustees