

January 5, 2022

Dear Friends,

I hope this message finds you all well. I wanted to let you know that church leadership has decided to pause our public in-person worship services for the remaining four Sundays in the month of January 2022. This is a temporary, short-term pause until the Omicron surge dies down and it is safe to resume in-person worship.

All other functions of the church will continue through January. Office hours will remain the same, Board and Committee meetings will continue via Zoom, Confirmation will shift to Zoom, and we will be preparing for the Annual Meeting on February 6, 2022. In terms of pivoting back to online worship for a few weeks, here is an initial, rough- sketch of things.

1. We will begin with two Sundays of Zoom Worship on January 9<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup>. These will be at 10:00 a.m. on Sunday mornings and will be held via Zoom. The links and other info you need will be in the Friday emails.
2. The following two Sundays, January 23<sup>rd</sup> and the 30<sup>th</sup>, will be prerecorded services where Bernard and I will be doing something together in the sanctuary. The video links to these two Sundays will be emailed out and you can watch the video on YouTube. These two weeks are the start of the upcoming sermon series. The dates for the related book read, which have not been scheduled yet, will also be announced. These will also be on Zoom.
3. All four Sundays in January will have a Zoom Coffee Hour at 11:00 a.m. for those who wish to catch up with one another.

For those who haven't been following the statewide Covid trends, here is a simplified six-month snapshot of where things have been, how they have proceeded, and where they are likely heading. When we regathered for in-person worship this past June, the statewide daily number of confirmed new cases was averaging around 100. By September - thanks to the emerging Delta variant - that number rose into the 1000 to 3000 range. By November we were seeing days top out with between 4000 - 6000 new cases each day. Towards the beginning of December, as the Omicron variant began taking hold, the number jumped up to 12,000 new confirmed daily cases. During the final two days of 2021 (which was less than a week ago), our state was clocking in at more than 21,000 new cases a day.

As you can see, the Omicron variant is the main reason behind the skyrocketing cases. While the Omicron variant is not more dangerous than Delta, it is more contagious. The major problem with Omicron is that it is able to get around the antibodies we have built up from the vaccines. This is why there have been days with 16,000 breakthrough cases – where vaccinated and boosted people are getting infected and spreading it to others. This is why the town of Groton is moving to a mask mandate. As of this writing, the last seven days have had 16,783 confirmed cases in Middlesex County. That is how high the transmission rates currently are.

Here are three simple and good suggestions for those who are interested.

1. Make sure you are fully vaccinated and boosted. This protects you and this will diminish the chance of you passing Covid along to others.
2. Buy some rapid test kits you can use at home. They are simple, easy to use, and cheap. I used them preventatively before, during, and after the Christmas week to ensure I wasn't unintentionally passing along anything to you during worship or taking something home and infecting my family. These at home tests work best in determining positivity if you feel sick or under the weather. Walmart is the cheapest place to order them.
3. Upgrade your mask. Cloth masks are better than nothing, but they aren't very good against Omicron. Disposable surgical masks are good. KN-95 masks are really good, and N-95 masks are the best. Remember, aerosols work like cigarette smoke or cologne; you don't need to be right next to the person to smell and inhale it.

The 'good news' is that many experts are hopeful that the current spike will diminish quite quickly in maybe four to six weeks. While Omicron is skyrocketing, we also have many more tools at our disposal when compared with last year: vaccines and boosters, at home test kits, and better understanding of the benefits of masking.

Again, this four-week pause in public worship is temporary, and we will continue to evaluate things as we go. Your church leadership thanks you for your understanding, cooperation, and patience.

Peace,

Corey