

Finding Hope in a Time of Lament - An Update from the FPC COVID-19 Re-Entry Task Force (RETF)

“Why have you forgotten us completely? Why have you forsaken us these many days? Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored; renew our days as of old.” Lamentations 5:20-21

Our lives since March have been so full of change — from work to school to shopping to visiting with family and friends — we have had to learn whole new ways of “doing” most of our daily activities. And church is no exception. We have given up congregating with one another in-person to keep each other safe and reduce the spread of the virus. And besides grieving the changes in our way of life, we mourn the toll of illness and loss of people in our community. We lament and search for elements of hope.

So, more than 7 months into this experience — where are we in North Carolina, Alamance County and at First Presbyterian Church? What are the ways the RETF is monitoring the situation and making decisions about our future activities here on the FPC Campus? Where is hope to be found?

The RETF continues to monitor dashboards of county, state and national data. We pay close attention to metrics such as:

- the number and rate/100,000 population of new cases, generally in a 24 hour period (both in NC and Alamance County)
- the average of new cases over the last 14 days (measures trend in communal virus burden) (NC level metric)
- the number of close contacts being monitored (Alamance County level metric)
- the number of hospitalizations and its trend (both in NC and Alamance County)
- the number of deaths and the trend of this outcome (both in NC and Alamance County)
- the percent positivity of current test results (both in NC and Alamance County)
- the overall testing trend in the state (NC level metric)
- the sources of clusters of infections in NC (NC level metric)

By any of these metrics, across the state and particularly here in Alamance County, we are not moving in a direction that makes returning to in-person worship something we can undertake without significant consideration and deliberate, careful effort to mitigate risks and to ensure people’s safety and well-being.

We remain deeply concerned for the health and well-being of both our staff and congregation. The virus that causes COVID-19 is very prevalent in the Alamance County community and in North Carolina, resulting in upward trends in cases, hospitalizations and deaths.

The RETF continues to monitor and consume governmental policy and advisory documents from federal, state and local agencies, informed by the context of our own situation.

On October 2, 2020, Governor Cooper moved the state from Phase 2.5 to Phase 3. Already extended once from an end date of October 23 due to the increase in COVID-19 cases, NC will remain at this level of re-opening until at least November 13, unless further governmental action is taken in the interim.

This progression allowed for further easing of group sizes for indoor and outdoor events at FPC. On October 18, the RETF recommended to our Session and they approved, a move from 30 to 50 persons for outdoor gatherings along with maintenance of our limit of 10 persons indoors, except for events in Calvin Hall for which the limit moved to 25 persons. Except for this shift in numbers, FPC will maintain our current policies for the foreseeable future, in part because of the burden of COVID-19 infection in Alamance County.

Besides further changes in policy by our state government and the level of community viral burden, the capital improvement project of the duct, lighting and painting refurbishment of the sanctuary is of significant concern regarding our ability to return to congregational worship. While this project is

well-underway, it will keep us from a return to gathering in the sanctuary, during which we will continue to live-stream our Sunday services from Williams Chapel. The chapel is too small a space for safe in-person gathering and live-streaming is not available in Calvin Hall.

The renovation was originally projected to be completed by the end of November. It is now projected that the earliest the sanctuary could be available for use would be December 13, 2020. This assumes full completion of the renovation project itself as well as the reinstallation and cleaning of our organ.

The RETF continues to monitor and consume guidance produced by national level church organizations along with re-entry plans developed by specific churches (most of which are here in North Carolina).

The practical considerations of a return to in-person gathering in a time of pandemic and elevated communal viral presence are complex and myriad, requiring deliberate and careful planning. One of the principal reasons we need to be careful is that religious gatherings are consistently one of the greatest sources of community based clusters of COVID-19 disease in NC.

To that end, the RETF has been reviewing re-entry plans from other churches as well as federal and state guidance about returning to larger gatherings (both in churches and in other settings). Among the items we are reviewing are how best to manage ventilation/airflow in the sanctuary (we cannot open windows), how to effect efficient ingress to and egress from a service and how to manage physical distancing in the pews. These and other concerns extend beyond the basic three W's of wearing a face covering, waiting six feet apart and washing our hands, all of which are vital behaviors to incorporate in any plan we develop. Screening also continues to play a role for any event we offer.

Besides the viral burden in our community, other factors we must consider are the effects of increased indoor occupancy due to the arrival of colder weather and the holidays, a potential rebellion to safeguards, isolation fatigue, and the realistic likelihood that effective vaccines and recovery treatment protocols will not be widely available until mid-2021.

Moving from Lament to Hope

Despite the sober situation in which we find ourselves, hope may be found in the recommendation to the RETF from FPC Worship and Music Committee that we begin plans for a limited reopening in our sanctuary (contingent upon the renovation completion). Specifically, they have proposed and the RETF concurs that it is reasonable for us to return to an 8:30 am and 11:00 am worship schedule, most likely in December.

The 8:30 am service would be limited to 30 minutes and have an attendance ceiling designed to support physical distancing in the pews. Screening processes, required face coverings and hand sanitizing will all be in place. There will be no singing or responsive reading from the pews. And there will be no live streaming of this service.

After the 30 minute service, a high volume air flushing of the sanctuary will occur for a minimum of 90 minutes. This will help clear the air of any residual contaminants prior to the return of our staff and musicians for the 11:00 am service.

The 11:00 am service will be live streamed and will continue what we have done since March with no in-person attendance and a limited staff presence to mitigate risk.

Upon completion, the plan will need Session approval. The RETF will seek to retain discretion governing its actual implementation in our role as the body responsible for the monitoring of COVID-19 metrics and state guidance.

Another Reason for Hope

You have agency in how we proceed. On the RETF section of the FPC website where you can find our church COVID-19 guidelines, you will also find links to data dashboards for Alamance County and North Carolina. Additionally, we have added (and will periodically add more) documents summarizing data and policies from organizations like the federal Centers for Disease Control and the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services.

In addition to reviewing these links, we would like to encourage you to use link on the RETF to form where you may questions, comments, suggestions, etc. to the RETF. We are interested in hearing from you and welcome any ideas you may have.

Moreover, you can participate in the social contract that is mask wearing and physical distancing. The virus that causes COVID-19 is predominantly spread via aerosolized particles. Wearing a face covering over the nose and mouth reduces the likelihood that anything one exhales reaches another person. In other words, we should all wear face coverings to protect others and expect them to do the same to protect us.

Additionally, separating by at least 6 feet when we are in a store, a line, even at a church event, also helps minimize the spread of what one may exhale to some one else.

Lastly, washing your hands can help prevent the transfer of virus particles from surfaces to your face.

Remember the Hope Found in Our Community

The way through this pandemic is together. Caring for one another and doing the things we know to make a difference are what we must do. This collective effort is what will help drive down the prevalence of the virus in our community and it is the way through to allowing greater in person activities.

We all miss what has been our usual way of doing things, no doubt. And while there are a variety of approaches to re-opening in play among other faith communities in North Carolina and Alamance County, the old adage of just because you CAN doesn't mean you SHOULD applies. The RETF is taking a serious and deliberate path to a return to in-person activities and we ask that you join with us in this cautious approach to the mitigation of risk. We welcome your input and will continue to review the current situation and provide further updates to the FPC Session and Congregation.