

June 22, 2021 (updated August 22, 2021)

Dear People of Hope,

I am excited to write with the good news that we began in person worship at Hope on Sunday, July 11, at 10:30 am. This in-person worship service is also shared on Zoom, so anyone may worship from home as well (same Zoom link as we have been using).

Our Worship Return Team made this recommendation after considering guidance from the ELCA and our Metro DC Synod, alongside careful consideration of these factors: (1) the number of COVID-vaccinated people in our community; (2) the much lower level of community spread and continuing downward trend; (3) the effectiveness of vaccines in relation to the variants; and (4) the deep desire to worship together in person. My understanding is that almost everyone from Hope's community who is eligible for the vaccine has received it; it is heartening to see how many people have been vaccinated, and I really encourage those who can but have not yet been vaccinated, to do so. If you have not yet received the vaccine, please reach out to me. I'd love to talk about any concerns and/or connect you to a vaccination location. Still, we recognize that those younger than 12 are not eligible to receive the vaccine—and we do not want to exclude them from worship. Additionally, we know people with compromised immune systems cannot be sure of the vaccine's efficacy so we remain cautious together.



While nothing is 100% risk-free, we believe that worshipping in our sanctuary, with the windows open or our AC circulating air, with people physically distanced and everyone masked for a time period of less than one hour, is very low risk in terms of COVID.

We will observe these protocols through July and August:

1. Everyone over the age of two will wear masks throughout indoor worship, per Prince George's County regulations. Those speaking in front of the congregation will be masked and at least 12 feet from the congregation. All those speaking will be vaccinated.
2. People will be physically distanced in the sanctuary. Certain pews will be marked for seating or no-seating, to guide our spacing.
3. We ask anyone who does not feel well to stay home.
4. We will keep a list of those in attendance, in the unlikely event that contact tracing is needed. This list will be kept confidential and destroyed when no longer needed (after three weeks).
5. Paper bulletins will be available, but you will pick up your own from a table. Offering baskets will not be passed; you may place your offering in a basket as you enter or exit. Or you may continue to give online or by check in the mail. The Sharing of the Peace will be done verbally and as a whole community; we ask that you not hug or shake hands.
6. Music will be led by a pianist and 1–2 singers who will all be vaccinated and masked. Attendees are invited to hum or sway; please refrain from singing along.

7. After the dismissal, worshipers will be directed outside to receive Holy Communion. Communion will be blessed and served in professionally packaged individual cups. Vaccinated people will distribute communion.
8. Following communion, you may remove your masks (or keep them on) for conversation outdoors as long as you like.
9. At this point, there is no child care during worship; children are welcome in the sanctuary and welcome to be fully themselves (quiet or noisy, throughout worship)

Before September, we will release new worship practices, based on developing research and COVID rates in our surrounding area. Our updated practices may include congregational singing, communion indoors, child care during worship, returning to our traditional 10 am time, and perhaps fewer mask and physical-distance requirements. We will see what develops in the coming months.

As excited as many are to return to in-person worship, there are some who will make the choice to continue worshiping online. For now, we will continue Zoom worship during in-person worship, to allow for many types of connection. Please be patient as we learn new skills and new technology to accommodate this. We certainly won't get it all right on the first try, but we will keep working at it.

We will continue to offer in person worship, as long as public health conditions allow.

I am grateful to God who has called us to be church and guided us through the past year. And I am grateful to be seeing many of you in person soon.

In the Spirit who holds us all together,
Pastor Julie Bringman