Dear Church Family,

Since our church moved temporarily into the complete virtual world – I have been so amazed at how well our congregation has continued to find ways to be in ministry and to care for each other and those in need. It has been wonderful to see how many of you are worshiping together online each Sunday and staying connected to one another through online Sunday School classes, small groups, support groups, and ministry team meetings. Your passion for growing as Jesus’ disciples, and serving Him in and through the church has not wavered across these weeks.

Across these weeks – the health and safety of our congregation and our community have been of absolute importance to us. While we have wanted things go “back to normal” immediately, and we have been ready for in-person worship to resume since the first day we moved online, we know that things take time. We know that it is better to respond than react in light of the severity and devastation wrought by COVID-19. We also know that there is a difference between what we want to do and what we need to do.

As our society continues to learn more about COVID-19, and also find new puzzles to solve almost daily, the Leadership Team at Vestavia Hills UMC has been asking the question, “Is there anything that we can safely offer in person starting in June.” We are trying to balance recommendations from a number of sources:

- The Governor’s Office
- The Bishop of the North Alabama, UMC
- The County Health Department
- The CDC Guidelines for Community and Faith-Based Organizations

We have also had the great fortune of being able to consult with a number of physicians and faculty from the UAB School of Public Health who are members of our congregation. Finally, we have been in contact with the Church Council Executive Committee and have gained their support for our proposed plan for relaunching in-person gatherings and worship services.

In a church setting, there are a number of specific challenges that public health officials are trying to keep from repeating. Some of the largest, single-source outbreaks occurred in college and church choirs, and in church gatherings. Our first goal is
safety, so we are choosing to move slowly.

These are the specific challenges that we face as we move forward:
- With an airborne virus that lingers in the air, indoor settings are more problematic.
- Ventilation systems that recirculate air into the same space keeps these particles moving.
- Singing and exercise expel air particles much further than six feet, and there are more particles exhaled than during regular breathing.
- While the CDC has lowered the concern related to hard surfaces including door handles, hymnals, bulletins, offering plates, and pews being a source for spreading the virus, it did not fully eliminate that possibility.
- The longer a group is gathered in the same room, the risk increases.
- Ministry to children while Social distancing is not practically possible.

Almost everything we do inside of our facility carries these risks. While recent news stories and the President's order indicate that we should have the option to return to in-building worship services, we have listened to you as you responded to the recent survey which indicated that around 65% of you would wait several weeks before returning to worship or would continue to worship online for quite a while. You also shared that you are very concerned about social distancing in the building, and the ability to limit contact during our time together. However, Vestavia Hills Methodist has a long history of experimenting and trying something new - and so we are looking for safe alternatives. While we will not be offering worship in the building until after July 1 at the earliest, we will begin experimenting with different ministry opportunities in June.

We will continue offering our online worship every Sunday morning at 8:30, and we are also hoping to offer Pop-Up Outdoor Worship Experiences on one or more Sundays in June. The service would be held in the area of Dick Kelly and Lighthouse Park and the Parking Lot near Tyson Hall, and we would probably hold the service at 9:00AM. As with anything outdoors – weather will play a factor – so we will send out a Church-wide email about 48 hours before the service, and again 24 hours out. Those emails will contain information about the service and what we will all be doing in order to safely worship together. We will work on processes to make sure that we are safely physically distanced by family group, and that we can exit at a pace that maintains that distancing. Persons can bring their favorite lawn chair or blanket for themselves and their family. These services will be shorter in duration, making it a little easier for children, and restroom facilities will be available.

We also know that some of our Small Groups and Sunday School classes would like to meet in-person. Some are meeting now on outdoor decks and patios. But in June – we will make the three covered drop offs and Dick Kelly Park available to be reserved by your Sunday School class or Small Group. You can email Melinda Burnett (mburnett@vhumc.org) to reserve one of those locations.
We have recently begun a new Devotional Series on Facebook and Instagram, and we will keep adding new content to those Social Media Services. We will also be adding additional online Bible Studies in June. One of those will be Bill and Kipp's Excellent Bible Adventure. We will be studying the Gospel of John, and you are all welcome to participate in an interactive discussion on Zoom each week.

So, it’s not the June we’re used to, but we are praying that we discover some new experiences that may create new traditions and ways to do ministry together in Christ. We know that other churches may choose to open sooner, but we want to return to worship when it can feel somewhat “back to normal”, and when we feel that we are not placing you in danger by inviting you back to worship.

Please be in prayer that as the State opens back up – that people will continue to understand the need to practice physical distancing and to wear face coverings when they are out of their house. Be in prayer that people will continue to stay home as much as possible. Be in prayer that everyone will continue to respect and value those who are vulnerable and do all we can to keep them safe. Be in prayer for all of the people who have been diagnosed or worry that the symptoms they are experiencing are leading them down that path. Be in prayer for all of the families who have lost someone they loved. Be in prayer for health care providers and for those who are seeking a cure or developing a vaccine. And be in prayer for all who lead at every level in this time – none have led through a situation like this before, and all are trying to do their best.

It is an honor to be your pastor. A privilege to be in ministry with each of you. And you are always in my prayers.

May God bless you.

In Christ,

Bill