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AUBURN
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Auburn UMC COVID 19 Response and Phase-In Plan

Dear Friends,

Grace and Peace to you!

We pray all is well with you and your family. We know we are living in unusual times and during this season of global pandemic we have changed our way of living in ways never before imagined. We are grateful for you and the faithfulness and stability of the Auburn UMC family. You have all made sacrificial adjustments to remain active, caring, generous, and most importantly, committed to “loving God and neighbor” during this difficult time!

We are all hoping and praying to see an end to this pandemic. In the meantime, our Task Force created a “Phased In” approach to opening and re-gathering in the church building as an Auburn UMC family. As you read through these phases, we hope to address some of your questions.

Who is on the Covid-19 Task Force for Auburn UMC?

The Task Force for reopening the building of Auburn UMC is made up of leaders from our church and community, including: Auburn UMC pastors, staff, local educators, administrators, public safety officials, and medical doctors.

What information is the Task Force using for decision making?

Our Task Force is prayerfully listening to the local wisdom of the EAMC medical community, the leadership of Auburn University and our local Auburn School System, Bishop Graves and the Alabama-West Florida Conference, and the Alabama Department of Public Health. These local, state, and denominational leaders help us filter the news from places like the World Health Organization and the

Center for Disease Control in Atlanta. These institutions are made up of members and people closely connected to Auburn UMC. In other words, as we make decisions to move forward, we are relying on the guidance of Godly people whom we know have the best interest of your family and our community in mind.

How can we find access to this information?

We want you to be fully informed and below are links you can visit to keep up with the same information our Task Force will use as we move forward through our phases.

1. The Alabama-West Florida Conference: <https://www.awfumc.org>
2. The East Alabama Medical Center (EAMC): <https://www.eamc.org/patient-and-guests/covid-19-information/>
3. The Alabama Department of Public Health: <https://www.alabamapublichealth.gov/index.html>
4. Auburn University: <https://www.auburn.edu>
5. Auburn City Schools: <https://www.auburnschools.org>

When will the Auburn UMC building open to in person gatherings?

Our opening depends upon the data of the disease in our area. We will follow the best information we have available to us and best practices of local institutions in our area. At the time of this writing, the cases in our area are increasing and this delays our movement forward through the phases. We anticipate moving to Phase 3 and 4 as we move through summer and into the fall. We hope that by each of us wearing masks and social distancing in our community we can resume to some form of in-person gathering. Phase 5 is dependent upon a vaccine and we pray for the many people who are helping our world with this important work.

Are there certain requirements for returning to the building that are unique to Auburn UMC?

Our mission at Auburn UMC is to “Offer Christ, Nurture Others, and Serve All” so that lives are transformed and Disciples of Jesus Christ are made. Our mission never changes and yet in this season of pandemic we are called to create worship so people can maintain safe distancing. Ventilation

in a closed in space is something we must keep in mind in our various worship spaces. We are called upon to clean and disinfect each space before and after use, and allow at least three hours between gatherings. These requirements will alter our schedule and create opportunities for smaller gatherings and new worship times. We are preparing to have enough cleaning products on hand to properly clean and disinfect our facilities and worship spaces. Many of the products needed are currently on back order. Please know we will open for in- person gatherings as soon as we are able to move to Phase 4 of our plan. We will continue our Online Worship regardless of the phase. From our online church survey we have discovered that, even when Phase 5 is in place, some will still choose to worship at home. We want everyone, regardless of where or through what means they choose to worship, to feel connected to the missions and ministries of Auburn UMC.

What will worship look like and feel like when we return to the building?

It will be different than the last time we worshipped in person. When we first return to in-person worship (Phase 4) we will offer limited seating. Masks will be required for all persons and provided to those who do not have them. Families will sit together. We will have hand sanitizer stations and temperature checks for entrance areas. In other words, we want people to feel as safe as possible. We will follow the guidelines as outlined by the Alabama-West Florida Conference (found [here](#)). The good news is when we are able to return to in-person worship we will be able to see one another, feel the gift of sitting among a congregation, hear a live sermon, enjoy instrumental music, as well as a musical soloist or duet. This will be a blessing! When we find our way to Phase 5, our distancing and masks will be a thing of the past and worship will include choirs, congregational singing, and lots of hugs and handshakes. We look forward to Phase 5!

What was discovered in our church survey?

Auburn UMC recently offered an online survey for our congregation. We are grateful that over 675 people and families responded. Thank you! We noticed from survey responses that many of you used the word “safe,” as an important factor for your return. Many of you also shared the need to “see one another” in worship when possible. We also noticed this information:

- 57% of you consider yourselves in a high-risk category for Covid19.

- 77% of you feel our online worship has met and/or exceeded your expectations.
- 76% of you shared you are “likely” to wear a face mask and remain socially distant when we resume in person gatherings.
- 36% of you have taken advantage of small groups, Bible Studies, and Sunday School classes offered through Zoom technology.
- 419 of you left prayer needs for our pastors and clergy. Thank you!

What do the phases mean?

The word phase is important because it reminds us that this time we are living in is temporary. We may move quickly through one phase, or we may have to return back to a former phase based on medical information we are given for our area. In the meantime, there are phases of this pandemic which call us to live and act in certain ways based upon the best information available to us.

Phase 1

- We worship online
- Bible studies, small groups, and Sunday School classes meet online
- Church building is closed; office staff work remotely
- Mission work continues through community partners as state and health guidelines allow

Phase 1 is the way we began living in mid-March when restaurants, schools, gyms, and churches closed their doors to in-person gatherings. As you recall, this is the phase when we began using terms such as “social distancing” and “flattening the curve.” For most ministries in this phase the key word is “online.” In this phase, we have discovered wonderful technology such as Zoom and Facebook Groups. This is also the phase that requires intentional time making phone calls, writing notes, keeping up with neighbors and most importantly, wearing masks and remaining socially distant.

Phase 2 *Criteria: decline in new COVID-19 cases in the area*

- Worship continues online
- Bible studies, other groups, and Sunday School classes continue to meet online, and may gather off-site in outdoor gatherings (while remaining socially distant) according to state and health guidelines Task Force has implemented a limit of 10 people per gathering.
- Church building is closed; office staff work remotely, with the exception of a few pre-approved staff personnel
- Mission work continues through community partners as state and health guidelines allow

Phase 2 is where we are today, June 30, 2020. The key part of this phase is that a decline in cases must be occurring locally. Small groups may gather following guidelines as outlined above. The staff will return to the building on a limited basis during this phase.

Phase 3 *Criteria: clear evidence of steady decline in COVID-19 cases over a 14-day consecutive period*

- Worship continues online
- Group gathering limited to 25 people
- Clergy may meet with larger groups to serve Holy Communion as well as drive-in worship possibilities
- Bible studies, other groups, and Sunday School classes may meet off-site or continue to meet online. Church building remains closed; office staff work remotely, with the exception of a few pre-approved staff personnel
- Mission work continues through community partners as state and health guidelines allow

Phase 3 happens when a downward trend in new cases of Covid19 is noticed and widely reported in our local area. As the decline of cases continues over a 14-day trend, gatherings of small groups may expand their numbers to 25 or less. In this phase, Sunday schools may consider meeting offsite. Drive-in worship may happen. More possibilities exist for each area of our church to gather. Phase 3 is designed as the preparation stage for moving to Phase 4.

Phase 4 *Criteria: Clear evidence of significant decline in Covid19 cases combined with the recommendation of the Conference and medical community*

- Worship continues online as well as some opportunities for in-person, on-site worship - masks and social distancing still required
- Begin to gather on church property, starting in smaller groups working towards larger gatherings
- Church building is open for gatherings, but requires event submission and approval by church administration
- Considerations for in-person children, youth, and vulnerable adult programming will be made in this phase

In Phase 4, the building will open for in-person gatherings, and more of the staff will return to work during the week. As we open the doors of the building for worship, we will follow the [Alabama-West Florida Guidelines](#). We pray we will be able to enter this phase in the safest way so we can allow people to see one another and worship again as an in-person congregation. Our online worship will continue for those unable to gather in person.

Phase 5 *Criteria: widespread approved vaccine availability*

- Online worship continues
- In-person worship resumes with no social distancing or mask requirements
- Begin to gather on church property, starting in smaller groups working towards larger gatherings
- Church building is open for gatherings, pending event submission and approval by church administration
- Considerations for in-person children, youth, and vulnerable adult programming will be made in this phase

During Phase 5 we will sing, hug, and embrace our friends for in-person worship. A vaccine will be available and conditions for distancing from others will no longer determine our plans for worship and ministry. Join us in praying daily for an end to the virus and the development of an effective vaccine.

Program and Ministry Questions:

I am grateful that even though our building has seen limited use, our programs and ministries have adapted and in some cases thrived during this season of quarantine. For example, our Food Pantry ministry and our mission outreach has never stopped feeding the hungry in the community. Our Children's Team has discovered how to offer a virtual VBS. We have had more adults involved in small weekday groups than normal for this time of year. As someone said month's ago, *"We no longer simply go to church, we are the church!"* We have all discovered new ways to function as followers of Jesus Christ. As you read through the various program responses to our phased in approach, please take time and pray for each area as each area discovers new ways to love God and neighbor.

What are the plans for Children's Ministry?

In compliance with Auburn UMC's Coronavirus Response and phase-in plan, Children's Ministry will continue to offer online Sunday School and worship opportunities. For the summer months, the Children's Council is working on a document to help support healthy offsite fellowship ideas for families, observing location (outdoors/indoors) guidelines regarding group size, social distancing and the wearing of masks. As AUMC enters Phase 4, groups may begin to meet in the church building. Two ideas have been suggested for children, offering Sunday school classes for families instead of age-level classes and/or limiting class sizes of the traditional Sunday school class. These details are in the works. When we enter Phase 5, Children's Ministry resumes its regular programming! If you have any questions about Children's Ministry at Auburn UMC, please feel free to contact Michelle Stearns at michelles@aumc.net

What are the plans for Youth Ministry?

In compliance with Auburn UMC's Coronavirus Response and phase in plan, several general guidelines have been developed. During Phases 2-3 Youth can begin to meet offsite outdoors in small groups of 10 or less (Phase 2) and 25 or less (Phase 3) wearing masks and following social distancing guidelines. MYF will continue to be online until Phase 4. During Phase 4, MYF may be split by grades or other criteria. During the Fall, D-Groups for grades 9-12 will most likely meet offsite following social

distancing guidelines but will still be resourced by Auburn UMC. Discernment and discussion are still ongoing concerning D-Groups for grades 7-8. We do prayerfully anticipate Phase 5 and a full return. For more information contact Marc Baugh at 334-559-1247, or MarcB@aumc.net

What about Sunday School and Small Groups?

In compliance with Auburn UMC's Coronavirus Response and phase-in plan, Adult Christian Education will continue to offer online Sunday School, Bible studies and small groups. As the phases allow, in addition to being online, groups may meet in person, observing location (outdoors/indoors) guidelines regarding group size, social distancing and the wearing of masks. As AUMC enters Phase 4, groups may begin to meet in the church building. Online classes will continue and Sunday School classes, Bible studies and small groups meeting in the church will follow the guidelines set forth by church administration; including pre-approval, size limitations, limited access, procedures when entering the building, social distancing, and wearing of masks. When we enter Phase 5 and are unlimited in our gathering size, oh what a day of rejoicing it will be. For more information, or to get plugged in to a Sunday School class or small group, contact Sarah Goolsby: sarahg@aumc.net.

What about our Music Ministry?

In compliance with Auburn UMC's Coronavirus Response and phase-in plan, we must look at our Music Ministry differently. The music ministry of Auburn UMC is such a vital part of our identity as a church. As we look at our plan, our music ministry will remain a valued online presence until we move to Phase 4 of our in-person gatherings. Due to the nature of Covid-19 transmission, it is more challenging for choirs and large ensembles to gather and sing in worship due to the health restrictions on singing in large groups. We are grateful for the creative ways our Music Ministers are providing avenues for gathering, practice, Hymn Sings, and online offerings. For more details about traditional music please contact Gary Klarenbeek: GaryK@aumc.net For more information about contemporary music please contact Chris Kelsey: ChrisK@aumc.net

What are the plans for Jubilee Ministry and our retirement age adults?

Harvesters and the Jubilee Ministry will offer online options when possible. They will continue to find creative ways to reach out in mission to places like Ease House and caring for neighbors in need. Restrictions on travel at the moment limit the opportunities for experiencing events such as concerts, plays, and travel excursions, yet plans are in the works for resuming all activities as a vaccine becomes widely available. For more information about upcoming plans for Jubilee Ministry please contact John Fox: JohnF@aumc.net

How will this impact REACH (Respite) Ministry?

The REACH program will continue to function taking several precautionary and protective measures. In an effort to protect our participants, families and volunteers in the REACH program will not meet for in-person programming during the first four phases of the Auburn UMC re-entry protocol. REACH @ Home will provide participants and families with encouragement and socialization through digital means, while the Community Care Partner Support Group will have opportunities to gather via Zoom. REACH volunteers will support families through a variety of ways. Contact with the Respite for All Foundation (RFA) and other respite programs will provide direction and support to the REACH director and REACH leadership team. Beginning in Phase 3, outdoor, socially distanced, home visits will be permitted for familiar activities such as balloon volleyball and other games. Phase 4 will allow for REACH director and volunteers to conduct home visits, as well as the continuation of yard games, digital gatherings and treat deliveries. REACH will not return to in-person, on-site gatherings until Phase 5 of the protocol. Perhaps most exciting of all, the REACH @ Home program will utilize customized care plans for each family. This is a beautiful opportunity for the REACH program to meet the unique and individual needs of participants and their families. For more information on how you can become a part of this ministry, please contact Christine Browdy: ChristineB@aumc.net

What about our Mission and Outreach Ministry?

As mentioned above, our Food Pantry and partnership with the [Food Bank of East Alabama](#) has been a vital outreach for people in our area. Our partnerships with [ARM, Alabama Rural Ministry](#), and [Our House](#) have also continued. Our MERCY ministry has also discovered ways to offer hope and help to

people during these difficult days. The Work Area on Mission will support our mission partners in prayers and financial support throughout all phases. All mission team or service opportunities will be considered on a case-by-case basis following a “do no harm” guideline. Certain local mission or disaster recovery projects will be considered in Phase 2. Disaster recovery teams requiring overnight travel will be considered in Phase 3. We will begin assessing international mission opportunities in Phase 4 in consultation with [UMVIM](#) and with our mission partners following International, national, state, and local guidelines. With the wide availability of a safe and effective vaccine, we will cautiously return to a pre-pandemic mission team experience. For ways that you and your family can join in the mission of Auburn UMC as we serve others during this Covid-19 season please visit the volunteer hub on our website found [here](#). For questions about the Mission and Outreach of Auburn UMC please contact Joe Davis, joed@aumc.net

In closing, thank you again for your faithfulness during this difficult season. We are all discovering a deeper trust in God with each new step of this journey. None of us can predict when and how we will be called to a life of sacrifice and risk. In our journey together, I am grateful we will get through this and one day look back on this odd season in our journey of faith and give thanks for the many blessings discovered along the way. I am grateful to all of you for taking this opportunity to grow, remain connected, care for others, and prayer for one another. As the words to the children’s hymn remind us, “I am the church, You are the church, We are the church together. All who follow Jesus all around the world, yes, we’re the church together!”

Sincerely,
The Staff of Auburn United Methodist Church