

GCUMC IS "SPRINGING FORWARD" IN MARCH!



In-Person In-Door Gatherings Resume on Sunday, March 7th / New Worship Schedule March 14th

February 19th, 2021

Dear Church,

I am excited to share with you the big news that our congregation is "springing forward" next month by resuming socially distanced in-person worship and gatherings in the church building starting on Sunday, March 7th. It will be so good to at least have some of us back together inside!

Our Church Council met recently to review the latest local statistics related to the COVID-19 pandemic and to prayerfully seek God's wisdom regarding our next right steps. The decreasing number of new cases, the lower test positivity rate, the declining hospitalizations, and the increasing roll-out of the vaccines all led the Council to conclude that next month is the right time to begin a careful re-gathering of our congregation.

Beginning on the first Sunday in March, we will re-start socially distanced in-person worship in the Sanctuary each Sunday at 11am. Sunday School classes, journey groups, circles, and other groups within the church and from our community may also choose to re-gather in person and indoors beginning on that date.

Group leaders will be contacted this weekend and invited to attend one of two online information meetings next week (on either Thursday evening or Sunday afternoon) in order to learn about the process for reserving rooms that are large enough for each group to maintain appropriate social distancing. We will also discuss how groups can use technology to potentially hold "hybrid" meetings that include both those present and others online. Our hope is that during the week of March 7th we will also expand our open church office hours as well.

Then, on Sunday, March 14th, as our clocks "spring forward" by one hour, our church will spring forward with a new worship schedule. **On that second Sunday in March we will resume socially distanced 8:30am worship each Sunday in the Fellowship Hall in addition to the 11am service in the sanctuary. That same Sunday, in recognition of the time change, we will also be moving our Outdoor/Drive-In Service to a new time, at 6:00pm in the evening.** The timing of these significant steps forward is especially appropriate given that March 14th will be almost exactly one year to the day since our church first made a decision to suspend in-person worship due to the coronavirus pandemic.

While we are excited about these next right steps, we also recognize that the pandemic is not yet over. The number of new cases has essentially returned back to where it was in November, and the presence of newer, more contagious variant strains of COVID-19 remains a cause for concern. **For the time being, we will therefore continue to require that all gatherings at the church follow our Healthy Gatherings Covenant.** We will wear our masks, we will wash our hands, we won't greet others through physical touch, and we will keep a respectful distance from each other. Even those of us who have already received our two vaccine doses will be asked to continue to take these steps, because it may still be possible for an immune person to spread the virus, and because the anxious folks around us don't know whether we've received the vaccine or not.

Taking these precautions is not just about keeping ourselves safe, but also about making a sacrifice of love and a gesture of concern for the sake of our neighbors. We believe that following these guidelines will also inspire greater confidence in people that they can safely return to in-person church: it is a gesture of hospitality that makes it more likely that new people will join us in worship. Thank you in advance for making these sacrifices with Christ-like humility, and in the spirit of Philippians 2:4: *"Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."*

We also recognize that, even though our church is springing forward, there are good reasons why some of you may not be ready or able to resume meeting in person

or indoors just yet. That is why we will continue to offer online worship through the live-stream from the sanctuary each Sunday at 11am, and why will be continuing our outdoor and drive-in service into the summer. Many of our groups may also prefer to continue meeting online for the time being, or might adopt a hybrid model or an alternating schedule between in-person and Zoom meetings. They may also choose to meet outside instead. We encourage each person and each group to make the decision that is right for them, and to continue to offer to each other a maximum helping of grace.

Our staff and our church leaders will be using the next two weeks to prepare for welcoming people back into the building. We will be posting signs, re-arranging furniture, cleaning surfaces, recruiting ushers, scheduling groups, and setting up needed processes. Please pray for us and for our church as we take these exciting next right steps together. And please help us, even amid these dreary winter days, to spread the word:

GCUMC is springing forward in March! Thanks be to God!

Grace and Peace,
Pastor Jeremy