

November 18, 2020

Dearest SUMC Family,

When we returned to our sanctuary in October, we did so with a hopeful heart. All the while, though, we understood the sobering reality that a second wave of COVID-19 could dash those hopes and return us to the world of virtual worship. That day has come, and Monday night SUMC's Administrative Council made the decision to close the sanctuary for Sunday morning worship effective immediately. In addition, youth group and other small group activities will also move to a virtual format.

This decision was made fairly easily, but not necessarily lightly. The factors that we considered include:

- On Sunday, the State of Michigan issued a new series of restrictions, which includes prohibiting gatherings at non-residential venues.
- On Monday, Bishop Bard released a statement to all United Methodist churches in Michigan, saying, "I am asking you in the strongest way possible to refrain from in-person indoor worship for the Advent and Christmas season."
- Last week, the Berrien County Health Department and Spectrum Health Lakeland held a joint briefing where they shared significant concerns about the capacity of our educational and healthcare systems. Local school districts have so many staff members in quarantine that they cannot find enough substitute teachers. Similarly, local hospitals have so many staff members in quarantine that they are having difficulty covering shifts.
- Since the beginning of October, the number of new COVID cases in Berrien County has tripled. In addition, the percentage of positive tests has gone from 3% in mid-October to 17.5% last week. Because of this surge, the Berrien County Health Department no longer has the capacity to perform contact tracing for all new COVID cases.

We live in an incredibly interconnected world, where the decisions we make in our lives can have unknown implications in the lives of others. The safety protocols that we have implemented in our church thus far have been very well executed, but right now they are simply not enough. As Christians it is our call to love like Jesus did. As we approach the Advent season, our commitment to live out this call should be stronger than ever. I believe there is no better way to put this kind of love into action than to put aside our personal desires and preferences to help ensure the safety and well-being of others.

This decision is disappointing for all of us, because we know how important it is for the body of Christ to gather together. The upcoming holiday season will make it even harder to be apart. But it is the right decision, and I continue to be proud of the SUMC staff and members of the Administrative Council for their leadership and unwavering love for our congregation.

While the sanctuary may be closed, the work of the church is not. Sunday morning worship will be streamed through Facebook each week at 10:00, and is also accessible through our website. Pastor David and the rest of the staff and volunteer teams continue to be available to care for the needs of our

congregation. Please reach out if you have trouble accessing worship on-line, or if you need prayers or any other kind of support.

Back in June I shared with you all that COVID-19 has proven to be a marathon, not a sprint. I recently read a quote that said that this time of disruption is neither a marathon nor a sprint, but an entirely new kind of race altogether. The book of Hebrews tells us, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." I pray that when this race is done, there will be no winners or losers, but simply a group of faithful disciples who all cross the finish line together.

If you have any questions or want to discuss any of this in greater detail, please do not hesitate to contact me. My email address is rachel.anne.wade@gmail.com, or my phone number is (269) 757-2425.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rachel Anne Wade". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rachel Wade
Administrative Council Chair