

Brothers & Sisters in Christ,

I am thankful for each of you and for our partnership in the ministry of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It has been a year now since the beginning of the pandemic. I remember the last normal occasion that we worshiped together was on March 8, 2020. The week before we had experienced a great storm that had ravaged parts of Middle Tennessee. During the second week of March, we began to quickly adapt to virtual worship and digital discipleship. The lay leadership and staff were able, by the grace of God, to adjust to a new landscape that enabled us to stay connected in worship and fellowship in innovative ways. And in fact, to expand our witness, deepen our outreach and sustain our missional partners. This season has been the most difficult period in our generation. But it has also been one that has served to deepen our faith in God, and in one another.

Your patience and resilience in this time has been exemplary! We are grateful for the decrease that we are seeing in COVID cases in our area, and the increase in vaccines. We have and will continue to monitor this fluid situation. But at this point, with the recommendation of our Lead Team and Advisory Team, we are ready to move to **stage 3 of our reopening plan**. In this phase, we will be able to expand our participation in worship and to offer more opportunity for our children, youth and adults on campus.

I want to walk you through some of the details that make up stage 3, so that you may know what to expect as we move into this new phase.

Many of these positive changes will impact our weekend worship services. We'll be increasing our worship capacity from 125 to 200 people per service. We will continue our service times, on Saturday night at 5 p.m., and Sunday mornings at 8:30 & 11 a.m.

We will however, be adjusting how we prepare for worship each weekend. We will still have our registration system in place at bumc.net/worship, but it will now remain open through the weekend rather than closing on Fridays. We will still ask that you still let us know if you plan to be in-person in worship, even if you do so the day of the worship service. However, we will not have assigned seating. When you arrive on campus, you'll be able to choose where you sit in the sanctuary. We will continue our protocol of masking and distancing on our campus, and we ask that you be mindful of that as you choose where your household sits in the Sanctuary. I want to reiterate that this is an important way of caring for our neighbor.

In addition to the increase in worship participation, we will also be offering a nursery for children, age 8 weeks to 3 years, and Wonder of Worship for PreK-4s & 5s, &

Kindergarten, on Sunday mornings. We know that these are invaluable offerings for many of our families who wish to worship in person, and we hope that this will allow many of you this possibility. Our capacities for nursery and Wonder of Worship are somewhat limited, in order to keep the appropriate ratios of children to caretakers, so we do request that you register for these services each weekend should you need them. You can register for both nursery and Wonder of Worship at bumc.net/children. Your registration will help us to be better prepared.

Our Student Ministry has begun 6th grade Confirmation with 80 students this year. In Stage 3, our Confirmation class is now able to meet on our campus, so that these young disciples can familiarize themselves with the sacred spaces around our church and reconnect with our Student Ministry staff. Our team is also organizing grade level gatherings and youth choir rehearsals on Sunday nights for students to connect with each other and fellowship. Information about these gatherings and choir rehearsals can be found on the [BUMCSM](#) and [BUMC Youth Choirs](#) Instagram accounts.

Beginning April 5, our building will be open weekdays, from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. We know that there are times you need to come by the church, whether it's to pick up curriculum or drop off a meal for Fishes & Loaves, so we will have these times for you to be able to do that. Paula Cryan will be back at her desk in the front lobby to greet you with a smile. Some of our staff are also back in their offices, and are more than ready for this new stage.

With these updates and opportunities to gather in person, we're also mindful of those in our community who are not yet able to join in this new phase. We will continue offering online worship as well as online classes and studies for those who would prefer to join us virtually. Our pastors and Stephen Ministers also remain available to walk alongside those in need of support and comfort. Our [Find Care page](#) on our website shares all of the ways we're providing support – whether virtually or in person – in order to provide care for you.

We are continuing our journey through the Lenten season together. Our churchwide study led by Doug Ralls has 100 attendees gathering on Zoom each week to study the Passion of Jesus together. Our [Restock the Pantry](#) initiative is in full swing, with weekly educational resources for your family to learn more about GraceWorks Ministries and the remarkable work they do. These weekly prayer prompts and educational pieces are leading up to 2 collection dates when we will bring items to restock the GraceWorks pantry and thrift store. Those collection dates are March 28 – Palm Sunday – and April 2 – Good Friday. On these same days, we will be holding an outdoor Stations of the Cross

experience on our campus, led by the collaborative efforts of our Adult Ministry and BUMC Kids. We hope that your family will take part in both offerings of service and discipleship during Holy Week.

We also have special plans for Easter Sunday in the form of outdoor and online worship offerings. We anticipate beautiful weather to come, and we can't think of a better way to celebrate the resurrection of Christ than by celebrating in the midst of God's creation. We'll continue to share updates about those plans as they become available.

As we continue to expand and adapt our mission and ministry in the days together, I thank you again for your faithful witness to the good news of God's love. I also want to **share a link** to a special word concerning our stewardship from our Finance Chair, Christ Wyatt. I look forward to being with you in worship, either in person, or on live stream. May the peace of Christ be with you all!