

THE STATE OF BRENTWOOD UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

November 24, 2020

I want to begin with a word of thanks to God. I've been amazed by God's grace during these last nine months. One of my life verses is Romans 8:28: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." It doesn't say that God causes all things, but God works in all things for good. So, I want to begin by bragging on God and thanking God for his grace and mercy.

Secondly, I want to thank you for your faithfulness. Last March we could never have predicted the events that have come about as a result of the pandemic. 2020 has been a year like no other. It's been a year of great challenge and hardship but also one of deep devotion and trust. Never again will I take for granted the simple joy of Christian fellowship, of communal worship, of attending the funeral of a friend, of witnessing a covenant service of marriage, or affirming the congregational pledge to one who has been baptized. We understand better than ever the significance of human contact and embodied faith.

But we have also learned to adapt to new ways of shared community. We have learned to use technology in ways that sustain faith and strengthen our relationships. We have learned to become more patient and nimble, relying in a deeper way on Christ and others. As is often the case with suffering, it provides perspective on what is most important in life. Indeed, God often does God's best work in seasons of exile and grief. We are relearning the meaning of Romans 8:38, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus;" not even a pandemic.

This update is a bit lengthy, but I want to make sure we are sharing complete and helpful information with you, as we continue to be in ministry together during this difficult and challenging time.

1. Many of you participated in our recent church-wide survey. Your input has been most helpful as we continue to discern our ministry together in the coming weeks and months. You can view the results of our survey at bumc.net/survey. Thank you for sharing your feedback with us for our planning purposes.
2. Our online worship continues to be a key way of keeping us connected. We are offering 3 services each weekend, online and also in-person when protocols allow. And in addition, we've offered a contemplative prayer service on Wednesdays this fall. In these services, we have averaged nearly 4,000 attendees weekly.

This is a significant increase in our worship attendance from last year, when we were doing only in-person worship. In the future, beyond COVID, we will continue to offer

a hybrid model of both in-person and online worship. We continue to look for ways to strengthen our worship experience, both in-person and online, by adding the necessary equipment and staffing, and improving the acoustics in the sanctuary, so that when we return to more in-person worship the quality of sound will be enhanced. We are also considering ways that we can have a greater pastoral presence online with our streaming community, both locally and beyond.

3. We are constantly monitoring the pandemic. The recent increase in cases statewide and in Williamson county has caused us to move back to Stage 2 of our Reopen Chart through the end of November, which means that we will not be having in-person worship until the case number decreases, hopefully in December. You can view our Reopen Chart on our website, which details the specifics of how we will facilitate ministry in the pandemic. We understand this is a fluid situation that demands we be attentive and nimble in our response.
4. We are encouraged with the recent news of a vaccine that could soon be available. And we believe that this will enable us at some point in 2021 to begin to find a new normal. In our most recent survey, 69 percent of you indicated that you would not return to in-person worship until there is a vaccine and/or until all restrictions are lifted. We look forward to that day, and in the meantime, we will continue to offer meaningful online ministry opportunities.
5. Adult Discipleship continues to offer numerous studies that engage us in Scripture and in mission that call us to go deeper in our love for God and neighbor. Digital discipleship will continue to be a priority for us.
6. Our Sunday School classes and small groups will continue meeting virtually. We have found this to be an essential means not only of discipleship, but of personal and relational accountability, and we encourage groups to continue meeting virtually. Our capacity to meet virtually is maximizing participation.

In addition, for those who desire it, we are able to arrange for small groups of youth and adults to meet in-person as the space allows, depending on the stage we are in. Because of physical distancing, the rooms will not allow the usual number of people, which sometimes minimizes participation.

In the new year, we will continue to offer a phased-in approach to all facets of our ministry. And as the weather gets warmer, our capacity to do more outdoor ministry will increase.

7. Our missional priorities continue to be a key part of our life together, and we are working to identify ways we can be in mission to our community during the pandemic. We are particularly mindful of supporting our strategic missional partners, such as Harvest Hands,

Healing Housing, and South Africa Outreach. We are doing our best to help sustain these partners through this season. We are also continuing to strengthen our church plants in Spring Hill and Nolensville. We celebrate with The Village their groundbreaking just a month ago on 26 acres in Nolensville for the first phase of their building.

8. Congregational Care continues to serve through Grief Care, Stephen Ministry, older adult visitation, and mental health forums.
9. Your stewardship has been remarkable this year. Our pledged giving is on target to again be near the 100 percent mark. While our non-pledged giving is down, we are still on track to reach 96 percent of our original budget for the year. Of course, we have also underspent our budget thus far by 7 percent. So, we are on track for a strong finish to 2020. Our Finance Chair, Chris Wyatt, will be bringing a detailed stewardship update to us in worship in early December. Thank you for your generous support & sacrifice in our ongoing mission and service!
10. We are in constant conversation with lead team and lay leadership to make sure that we are allocating and reallocating our resources, both human and financial to where we need them the most. We are projecting ministry in the new year quarterly, expecting that as the vaccine becomes available and the virus subsides that we will gradually move towards a new norm of ministry which will include more in-person engagement. However, we will continue to offer online and in-person opportunities in worship and discipleship in a hybrid model. Adaptive leadership will be important as we move forward.
11. In this regard, I'm excited to share that we will be hosting an online seminar in early 2021 with Dr. Tod Bolsinger. Senior Congregational Strategist and Associate Professor of Leadership Formation at Fuller Theological Seminary and author of the *Canoeing the Mountains*, a book on adaptive leadership in uncharted territory. We believe that God will use this seminar to help us become more strategic in navigating mission and ministry in the future.

Finally, let me close by mentioning some plans we have for the season of Advent.

- Beginning November 23 at 7 p.m. we are offering a 4-week Advent study lead by several of our pastors and staff members. We'll be using Adam Hamilton's newest book *Incarnation: Rediscovering the Significance of Christmas* as a guide to examining the names of Christ used by the gospel writers, exploring the historical and personal significance of his birth. It's not too late to join.
- On Saturday, November 28, families of all sizes are invited to join us for our Annual Advent Festival. This will be a drive-thru event in which we will give you the materials to help make Advent meaningful in your own home (such as the Advent wreath, candles

and liturgy for the lighting of the wreath through each week). These supplies will be ready for your pick-up on Saturday, November 28, between 9 a.m. and 12 noon. You can register for this event on our website at bumc.net/advent. The cost of the materials is \$25 per family, and all families are welcome.

- On Sunday afternoon and evening, December 6, we will be hosting a drive-thru tree lighting and live nativity with animals and actors. Please be on the look-out for specific times with live animals. This will be a meaningful outreach event to our entire community.
- On Wednesday evening, December 16, we will be streaming our Longest Night service. This service offers a time for spiritual healing and hope in the midst of brokenness. It truly is one of the most meaningful worship experiences of the year.
- On Sunday afternoon, December 20, we will be premiering our virtual Festival of Carols! In place of an in-person event, we will stream the concert for you to enjoy from the comfort of home. Our Worship & Arts team have been recording in ensembles this marvelous worship experience for us to enjoy. It will include elements of Scripture, stories and music that will bless your heart.
- And lastly, on Christmas Eve, we are planning to offer multiple online worship services and drive-in outdoor services. The online worship services will offer a band-led contemporary style of worship and a traditional worship, and will premiere at 4 p.m., 6 p. m. and 8 p.m. The outdoor drive-in will be a time where you can experience Christmas Eve worship safely in your car. Through FM transmission, you can tune in on your car radio to listen to this live outdoor service. Depending on the stage we are in at the time, there may be an opportunity to join us on the front lawn near the great Christmas tree that will be placed there early in December, with lawn chairs or standing, with remaining in your cars always an option. The outdoor services will be offered at 3 p.m., 5 p.m. and 7 p.m.

You can find more information about all of these opportunities on our website at bumc.net/advent and on the BUMC App. We look forward to these experiences and hope you can join us online or in person as you are able!

In closing, I want to say again how grateful I am for your faithfulness and prayers. It is a great privilege to serve Christ with you in this season. Thank you for being the Church. We are rediscovering anew that the Church is not a matter of brick and stone. Its people, worshipping and serving God and one another. I remind you of our vision. We are called to shape the heart of the community by creating a culture of love formed through relationships with Christ and others. This is our purpose. May God continue to bless and shape us as a people, for such a time as this!

Let us pray. We thank you God for your amazing love, from which nothing can separate

us. We thank you for our congregation. For 169 years of ministry in this community and throughout the world. We are grateful to be your servant. As we continue to walk with you, deepen our trust in you and one another. Help us to love you with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves, that we may indeed, demonstrate by our fruit, that we are your children, to your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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