

Return to Worship: May 2021 Edition

Grace Lutheran Church

It's time. It's finally time to start the gradual homecoming of our Grace family. The Return to Worship team has been working with the pastoral staff to plan just how that will happen, starting Sunday, May 2.



Since the team was formed approximately a year ago, our overriding concerns have been to follow Synod advice; federal, state and local recommendations; current scientific guidance; and, most especially, the commandment to love one another, to treat our Grace brothers and sisters as if they were ourselves.

This philosophy has been the overarching principle we tried to follow for May as we pilot our first in-person worship at Grace in months (excepting Christmas Eve and Easter). Please understand these preparations are, indeed, a pilot. We know we will need to make changes as we put our plans into action and we humbly ask your forgiveness and flexibility as we adjust and adapt. Please understand the worship experience you encounter May 2 will probably not be the same as the one you have June 6.

And what will that worship experience in May look like? Here are the current plans:

8:30 a.m.: We will resume the parking lot worship service of last summer and fall. There are no changes planned for this service, other than we will need everyone attending to enter from Beaver or Foster and exit the parking lot onto Garner after the service has ended. Garner will be blocked at the start of this service, but the barriers will be removed at the end of worship.

9:30 a.m.: This will be a weather-dependent outdoor service celebrated in the Columbarium courtyard. We will ask congregants to enter Grace from either Foster or Beaver and park in the Miller Center lot. Also, please bring your own chairs. This service is modeled after the popular Worship in the Park gatherings of last summer. Properly worn masks and six-foot distances between groups will be required even if parishioners are fully vaccinated, since we must protect those who are not yet vaccinated. Seating areas will be marked.

For safety reasons, we will need everyone to either enter through the Miller Center or use the sidewalk along Beaver that intersects to the sidewalk leading to the Columbarium. There are a few steps on that sidewalk, but an usher will be available to help anyone who might need it. And ushers will also be available in the Miller Center to help parishioners accessing the Columbarium courtyard from that direction.

As mentioned, this is a weather-dependent service. The decision to cancel the 9:30 a.m. service will be made no later than 8 p.m. the Saturday before. Congregants should check the Grace website and Facebook pages at 8 p.m. to find out the status of the next day's service. If possible, we will also send out an email, but cancellations will definitely be announced on the website and on Facebook.

10:30 a.m.: Indoor, in-person worship in the Sanctuary, limited to 60 individuals. This limit will allow us to provide six feet of distance between groups; all individuals must be properly masked. We have identified areas of the Sanctuary where we will seat individuals, couples, and families and ask parishioners to wait for an usher to direct them to a seat.

To enable us to adhere to the 60-person limit, we are requiring anyone interested in the 10:30 service to sign up by noon of the Thursday before the service. We are strongly encouraging everyone to use Signup Genius; links will be included on the website, Facebook page, and in E-Notes. If you are unable to use Signup Genius, you can also reserve a spot by calling the church office Monday-Wednesday, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., and Thursday from 8 a.m. to noon. Please, though, only call if you just can't use Signup Genius – we want to make this extra burden on church staff as light as possible.

As of now, there will be no congregational singing at either the 9:30 or 10:30 services. Although the vaccination rates are more than encouraging, there are still fewer people vaccinated than unvaccinated, and the dangers of COVID are real, no matter your age or health. It has been well-documented that singing is one of the most effective ways of letting virus particles loose into the air and while properly worn masks are effective, they aren't 100% effective.

To sum up:

1. If you're planning to come to the 9:30 or 10:30 a.m. services, we need you to wear a mask that covers your nose and mouth from the time you exit your car to the time you get back in your car.
2. We will also require groups to sit six feet apart, whether you're at the 9:30 or 10:30 service.
3. For the 9:30 service, check the website or Facebook starting at 8 p.m. Saturday to make sure the service is not cancelled if the weather is questionable.
4. For the 10:30 service, reservations must be made by noon Thursday, preferably via Signup Genius, but if that isn't possible, by calling the church office.

The Return to Worship team and the pastoral staff have – and continue to – put a lot of effort into ensuring the worship experience is as safe as possible, while also being meaningful. We know we haven't thought of everything and we are also well aware that some of the things we thought would work might not. Again, we ask for your patience, forgiveness and understanding as we go forward. As you sample the services we've planned, please tell us how we can improve – but equally as important, also tell us what you like. Together, we're coming back to Grace.

Lisa Wiedemer, The Return to Worship Team Leader