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Hello St Mary's community,

I'm Rev. Michael Burke, our Rector or Sr Pastor, and I bring you an update on a couple different things.

Welcome to Rev. Israel

First, a very warm welcome to our new Associate Rector, The Rev. Israel Portilla. Israel and his wife Linda Vosele and their six year old son Matthew arrived from Bogota, Colombia on August 15th.

St. Mary's established a search committee in the Spring of 2021, interviewed a number of candidates and recommended as a finalist. In September 2021 he and his family visited St. Mary's met with our youth and families, a number of ministry groups and committees, completed further interviews, and gained the support of the vestry, our elected leadership.

We have been patiently waiting on the US Immigration dept and US State Department to issue him and his family the necessary visas.

Over the several weeks, there will be multiple opportunities to get to know him, and to become acquainted with his numerous gifts.

Rev. Israel will be the clergy resource person supporting our ministry teams in the areas of early childhood ministries, Children's ministries, youth ministries, and Community outreach and engagement.

Fall Schedule

Our Fall schedule will begin on Sunday, September 11th, with an on-campus-only service at 8am in the chapel. At 10AM, we will have the usual main Sunday service, available both on campus and online via Zoom, Facebook Live, and Twitch.

Also starting the Sunday after Labor Day, Godly Play will return for children four years old through sixth grade during the 10 am service. Godly Play is hands-on religious education that engages children with our traditions and stories through discussion and play centered in God's boundless love. Parents bring children to Room 1 downstairs and sign them in when they arrive; when the lesson is done, they come to the sanctuary to join the rest of the congregation for communion.

Following the 10AM service coffee and donuts will be available in the Waldron Hall, our parish hall.

Then, from 11:30 – 12:30, we will have fellowship and formation hour with offerings on various weeks presented by parish groups, including, on occasion, our Adult Christian Formation team.

At the same time, from 11:30 – 12:30, children's Christian formation, what we sometimes called "Sunday School", will be hosted in the downstairs classrooms, and youth grades 7-12 will also meet downstairs for fellowship, formation, and activities.

For all of these activities and programs, we will need many helping hands, so please make your availability, interest, and willingness to serve God and our community in this way, to one of our vestry leaders or clergy.

And finally, "masking".

It has now been 30 months since COVID-19 first disrupted our usual patterns of church life. Since then, the St. Mary's community has proven itself to be adaptive, flexible, compassionate, and extremely patient. Despite our own

personal preferences or needs, we have conducted ourselves in a way that protected those who are most vulnerable among us.

Our goal all along was to protect one another, especially in the early months when no vaccines were available, and to protect the critical care resources of our local hospitals and care facilities. At any given time, we have a dozen or so members undergoing various forms of chemotherapy, or have other significant medical circumstances that would put them at a higher risk. Your willingness to share their burden by taking precautions such as masking has been admirable. We were fortunate to experience only three deaths from COVID within our membership, and none of those are believed to be directly related to our worship or our gatherings.

None of us have been happy about what we have all had to do, but I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your perseverance, patience, good cheer, and compassion that you have shown to one another. Once again you have shown, as so many times before, your willingness to sacrifice for the sake of others. May God bless you for that.

And now the time has come to change course. If you have been following reports, including those in the Anchorage Daily News over the past weeks, international COVID trackers report that the virus has evolved to the point where it is now believed to be within the range of risk of the seasonal flu, in terms of the risk of death, or hospitalization. Our children and our elders, along with those with underlying medical conditions have had the opportunity to be vaccinated, and in some cases, to have boosters.

We have learned that the virus is spread primarily through respiratory droplets, and that the highest levels of disinfection of surfaces may be de-emphasized for everyday gatherings.

We have also learned that N95 masks, if worn consistently and properly, provide a significant degree of protection for the wearer. The Center for Disease Control has adapted its guidance in light of the latest medical findings, as it has been doing.

And we will continue to offer our main 10AM worship service live and online, something more than half of our attendees are continuing to utilize.

Therefore, our vestry has decided that beginning the Sunday after Labor Day, Sunday September 11th, we will be moving to a masking-recommended-but-not-required at all worship services.

While we continue to recommend masks in crowded spaces, masking will be optional, and the decision is left to your best judgement.

We will continue to let small groups of 15 or less negotiate their own rules and expectations around masking, as long as the choice to mask is respected and care continues to be taken to protect the most vulnerable in your group.

That's my report for today, friends. To recap:

Welcome to our new Associate Rector Rev Israel Portilla and to Linda and Matthew.

We return to 8am and 10am Sunday services on September 11th, with formation and fellowship and youth group to follow.

And as of Sept. 11th, we are moving to masking-optional in all worship services.

Thank you all. God bless you all. Keep Coming Back.