

Dear Ones,

I would like to share some news. In the last few months, my doctors have discovered that I am immune compromised. I'm still learning what this means, but, for sure, I cannot be vaccinated against Covid. The reason for this is that tests have shown that I don't make antibodies to vaccines, and experience has shown that vaccines make me very sick.

Now, my body does have other ways to fight diseases and infections, so I don't have to live in a bubble. But during a pandemic, this diagnosis does cause some complications for me.

I will share with you that I was shocked and overwhelmed when I found this out. You might be feeling some of that, too, as you read this. But I've had a lot of time to process this news, as well as good advice from doctors, so am feeling confident about going forward.

I want to share with you that I can still do all aspects of my job as your pastor. I can still provide pastoral care, lead worship, conduct funerals and weddings, provide care for people in hospitals and rehab. But some modifications to how these are done will be necessary in some cases. So if you see me with extra PPE, please don't be surprised! 😊

When I shared this information with the Executive Board, some asked if I'm feeling okay. Other than seasonal allergies, I am! It turns out that I have had this condition for some time, but didn't know it. So it doesn't seem to affect my daily well-being.

I'm also really open to talking about this, so please don't hesitate to reach out to me, if you have questions or concerns. The members of my pastor/p parish team area also happy to process this information with you. They are:

Karen Holcomb-Merrill , Leah Horn, Marcia Kent, Charlene Avery, and Tamara Lipsey.

At the end of this email, you will find a list of FAQs that I have put together with my doctor's advice. If you think of a question that you would like added to that list, please let me know. I will compile these and then send out an updated FAQ in a week or so.

One last thing: I spoke with my specialist at the Mayo Clinic during a video call this week, and one of the things he told me was this: Ask everyone I know to get vaccinated-- for me. Building herd immunity fast is the best way to protect me and everyone like me.

This was a hard thing for me to hear. It feels awkward or perhaps selfish to ask people to do something for me. So my doctor, who shared with me that he is also a devout Christian, gave me a little sermon.

He reminded me that I, too, am a beloved child of God and it's okay to ask others to support me. He also reminded me that there are other people like me—people on cancer treatment whose immune systems can't handle the vaccine, people who are immune compromised for other reasons, all children under 16 who can't be vaccinated yet. There is a small community of vulnerable people and they need a voice.

He asked me to be that voice, to share my story, since personal stories can have a greater impact. So here goes:

There is an emotional pain to not being able to be vaccinated—a knowledge that I, and people like me, have to continue to quarantine while others go back to in-door shopping, to restaurants, to family gatherings, to concerts. Parents with children under 16 are filled with anxiety, torn between trying to give their kids some social experiences and protecting them from this virus. And our kids grieve what they have lost and continue to lose, many of them facing mental health challenges because of this time of quarantine.

Achieving herd immunity will change that for us. It will allow us to have more of a normal life, even if we have to continue to wear PPE when others don't.

I know that most, if not all of you are already vaccinated. But I want to take my doctor's advice seriously and ask you, please, if you haven't been vaccinated yet and your doctor advises you that it's okay to receive the vaccine, please get it.

If you know anyone who hasn't yet been vaccinated, please share my story, our children's story, and the story of so many others like me, in the hopes that they may choose to get the vaccine.

And if you cannot be vaccinated, my dear ones, you are not alone. Call me if you want to talk about it, as it is a pain that we share.

At the same time, I'm finding a lot of hope in these days. God continues to show up in my life in surprising and marvelous ways, reminding me that we all are remarkably resilient people! We've managed to get through a year of this and we will get through more, with God's grace.

Thank you all, and may God bless you.

Frequently Asked Questions

Please note that, because our understanding of Covid-19 is constantly changing, some of these answers may also change. These answers were compiled with the advice of my doctors.

1. Can Pastor Laura provide me with pastoral care?

Yes. We can talk in-person outside, on the phone, or through a video call. Once the current high case numbers of Covid come down, if you and everyone in your household are vaccinated, I can meet in-doors, if we are both masked, socially distant, and if I am sitting near an open window.

2. Can Pastor Laura visit me in the hospital?

Yes, for short visits, once cases in our area are lower, if the hospital rules allow it and with the proper PPE. If you have a communicable disease (like Covid), then I will have to do a video visit or phone call.

3. Can Pastor Laura conduct funerals and weddings?

Yes, if they are outside or online. My doctor has advised me to hold off on indoor funerals and weddings until coronavirus cases in our area are lower. We cannot hold them in our sanctuary until the Board opens the church for normal worship services. Once Covid cases in our area subside, we (and the venue where it would be held) would have to follow careful precautions until herd immunity is achieved. (For example, we would have to abide by the Health Department's guidelines about the number of people allowed inside, I would have to wear extra PPE and be socially distant, and we would have to discuss music options.)

4. Can Pastor Laura conduct baptisms?

Yes, if they are outside. Once cases are lower and our Board opens the church building, we would have to follow the precautions outlined above in #3. Also, the family and I would both need to agree to quarantine for 14 days before the ceremony. Ideally, everyone in the family and the sponsors would be vaccinated, if they can be. In the case of a child Baptism, I would recommend that the parents hold the child even at the moment of Baptism. Once herd immunity is achieved, most of these restrictions can be relaxed.

5. Can I hug Pastor Laura or shake her hand?

Not yet. During the pandemic, I need to practice social distancing, even outside. Once herd immunity is achieved, I may be able to hug and shake hands again, but not during flu and cold season.

6. Once we can hold services in the sanctuary, what special precautions will the church need to take?

Until herd immunity is achieved and cases of the virus drop significantly, and in addition to the guidelines our Board will put in place for everyone's safety, I will need to maintain significant social distancing and wear extended PPE. So I will need to stay at the front of the sanctuary. The entire congregation will need to be masked and I will not be able to stand in a receiving line. I cannot hold conversations in my office or in the hallway. I can hold conversations outside, though, if we are masked.

7. Can Pastor Laura share Communion with us?

When we meet in person, we will follow best practices for Communion that other churches are using. Pastor Laura can bless the bread and cup, but others will need to pass out the communion elements to the congregation.

8. How close can people come to Pastor Laura safely?

Outside, we should be a minimum of 6 feet apart and masked. Inside, a minimum of 6 feet apart, masked, and near an open window. My doctor has also indicated that the amount of time we spend in a space matters. So, for indoor visits, shorter talks are better.