

Church leaders respond to mask requirement

By NADA SEWIDAN
STAFF WRITER

Some Hermiston churches have ramped up their church service protocols following rising COVID-19 numbers in Umatilla County.

In light of increasing COVID-19 cases and the recent Lighthouse Pentecostal Church outbreak in Island City, some churches said they have been proceeding with more caution.

Pastor Patty Nance at Hermiston First United Methodist said the church is not open for service currently and that it does not feel safe to reopen anytime soon.

"I don't think we're going to reopen anytime soon," she said. "COVID-19 is rising every day. Everybody should want to keep people safe. We have to be responsible for making that happen."

In response to rising COVID-19 cases in Oregon, Gov. Kate Brown's new guidelines released on Monday, June 29, require all Oregonians statewide to wear a face covering in indoor public spaces starting Wednesday, July 1.

Kay Edwards, office administrator at Our Lady of Angels Catholic Church



A bird rests atop the steeple at Gospel Home Church in Hermiston on Friday.

Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

in Hermiston, stated the church will work with worshippers to comply with the new restrictions.

"We will post the governor's restrictions on the doors and we will work to be in compliance with those restrictions," she said.

Edwards said they have also modified their services and traditions since reopening to ensure safety, such as the way they receive communion.

She said that prior to COVID-19, churchgoers received communion in two lines. Now it's a single-file line, 6 feet apart, to maintain social distancing. They've also eliminated singing and the sign

of peace, a time during service when everyone shakes each other's hand as a greeting. Services are also much shorter now.

"We are taking every major precaution to be socially responsible in protecting anyone that's coming to one of our services," she said.

The church also keeps exterior and interior doors propped open so people don't have to reach for the handles. They have marked seating that is 6 feet apart, with every other pew blocked off. Hand sanitizer is also available throughout the church.

According to Edwards, 50% of attendees are back

Hermiston church will provide virtual services

HERMISTON HERALD

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Grace and Mercy Lutheran Church ELCA of Hermiston is meeting virtually at this time and believing, "When two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them." (Matthew 18:20).

Two services, led by Pastor Weston Walker, are available weekly on

Facebook, Zoom and YouTube. Sunday morning services are live at 9 a.m., and Holden Evening Prayer is live Wednesday nights at 7 p.m. and can be viewed at your convenience. All are welcome.

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conversations with other members of the church have ramped up and that although views may be polarizing on whether to go to church or stay home, there is no denying that cases are spiking.

He said that although the church is following the CDC-recommended guidelines, including social distancing measures, sectioning off pews and limiting the number of families in the church, he is still unsure if they'll remain open.

"We want to be proactive in ensuring health and safety in our building and staff," he said. "We do not want that to be our case here."

A since-deleted video of a church service in the Lighthouse Pentecostal Church showed members worshipping in close proximity to one another.

Valle-Lopez said one way to help mitigate close contact in his congregation is to limit the number of people who can be in the church building. While the space can usually house about 500 people, they are now limiting it to 60 people at a time.

"For us, it's whatever keeps people safe is what we're going to do," he said.

attending Mass since reopening, while others remain watching the livestream version.

Our Lady of Angels Catholic Church at full capacity can hold 850 people total, but with social distancing restrictions, the church can hold approximately 150 people — a combination of individuals, couples and family units. Edwards said ushers seat and direct everyone to make sure people are distancing safely.

The Lighthouse Pentecostal Church in Island City outside of La Grande

is now the site of the largest outbreak in Oregon since the pandemic began. The church is linked to at least 236 people who have tested positive for COVID-19.

Hermiston Assembly Associate Pastor Alex Valle-Lopez said since the Union County outbreak, his church has been debating if they should remain open or temporarily close.

"As we've seen cases go up, there have been conversations among our staff," he said. "We are thinking of closing as a preventative measure."

Valle-Lopez said that

Migrant Education Program honors 2020 graduates

The InterMountain Education Service District celebrated 51 students on June 27

By ALEX CASTLE
STAFF WRITER

Already facing educational disadvantages and hurdles to begin with, not even the COVID-19 pandemic could stop 51 students graduating from this year's Migrant Education Program in the InterMountain Education Service District.

Unable to hold a large celebration due to the virus that already altered high school graduation around the country, the program held a small celebration at Umatilla's West Park on Saturday, June 27, to honor the Class of 2020's success in wake of unprecedented challenges.

"Usually other students have their parents to do their FAFSA for them and all the other paperwork," said Brenda Flores, the program's graduation specialist, who previously graduated from Stanfield High School in 2014 and became a first-generation college graduate at Western Oregon University. "But for me and for others, we have to do it all ourselves."

Migrant students are youths whose parents move between school districts and throughout the country for seasonal work, often either in the agricultural or fisheries industries, and many are looking to become first-generation high school and/or college



Staff photo by Alex Castle

Rosy Madrigal (from left), Lisette Sanchez, Elizabeth Andrade, Kimberly Renteria, Eliana Esparza and Briana Duron pose for a picture during a celebration for graduating members of the InterMountain Education Service District's Migrant Education Program on Saturday, June 27, 2020, in Umatilla.

"THEY REALLY HELPED ME EXPLORE MY OPTIONS AND BECOME AWARE THAT THEY WEREN'T LIMITED."

Elizabeth Andrade, Irrigon High School graduate

graduates.

Flores said locally that can mean many students whose parents are generally unfamiliar with the American education system and can be challenged by how to fill out college admissions, financial aid and scholarship applications. While parents are generally supportive of their kids pursuing a diploma and a higher education, Flores said, these

challenges can leave many migrant students trying to figure things out on their own.

"As a graduation specialist, I help them navigate that," Flores said. "And I help the parents understand the importance and what steps they need to take so they also can start learning about the system."

Elizabeth Andrade was one of the students honored June 27 after grad-

uating from Irrigon High School this year. She plans on attending Eastern Oregon University in the fall to study business administration and credited the Migrant Education Program for both helping her realize what opportunities were available to her and helping her take advantage of them.

"They really helped me explore my options and become aware that they weren't limited," Andrade said.

Rosy Madrigal graduated as a co-valedictorian of Umatilla High School and is headed to the College of Idaho, where she's entering as a psychology major though she's not settled on it quite yet.

"I think it was really

helpful to have their support," Madrigal said of the Migrant Education Program.

Briana Duron, also a graduate from Umatilla High School, spent some of her high school education enrolled in classes at Blue Mountain Community College and already earned an associates degree to go with her diploma.

"It was really stressful at times and took a lot of patience," Duron said while highlighting how Flores and the district helped by establishing study groups for her to attend.

After her intensive studies these past years, Duron is taking some time off before attending a college or university in hopes of exploring the rest of the country first.

"I want to travel and do things that I didn't do when I was so focused on school," she said.

For Flores, it's a joy to return to the area and help students achieve similar success that she did just

years ago. "With everything that I've learned through my experience, it's nice to be able to help them to succeed," Flores said. "I tell the students my story so they know what they can achieve as well."

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