

May 21, 2020

Minister's Message

Dear Friends –

As the country begins to ponder re-emerging from our homes, I am reminded how grateful I am to live in Vermont, which leads the nation in successful response. As we are consistently reminded, however, now is not the time to lose our diligence. Even as restrictions are loosened, we are being asked to follow best practices – staying close to home, wearing masks, and limiting social gatherings. As such, it seemed an appropriate time to update you on the changes we expect to be implementing in the next few weeks.



The staff and leadership continue to be in close contact with the state and denominational authorities as we plan our re-opening. In order to do our best to safeguard our members and friends – who largely fall into the most vulnerable populations – we are planning to adhere strictly to Vermont State guidelines, and UCC best practices, erring always on the side of safety.

General Guidelines

1. If you are – *or anyone in your home is* – sick, not feeling well, returning from an area where you might have been exposed: **Do not come to the church building for any reason;** stay home. *This is not just for your safety and health, but for the safety and health of more vulnerable populations.*
2. If you are sixty-five or older, have respiratory issues, are immunocompromised, or suffer from any other chronic underlying medical conditions [high blood pressure, diabetes, COPD, heart disease, in cancer treatment or take medicines like prednisone], **please stay home.**
3. If you choose to come to the building for whatever purpose, **masks will be required at all times on church property.** The only exception will be staff and renters in their own office space. We will have a small supply on hand should you forget yours.
4. In accordance with guidelines, and for the safety of our members and staff, we have acquired a no-touch thermometer. Staff and visitors will be tested regularly.
5. Physical distancing guidelines will be strictly observed – we ask that you keep a minimum of six feet between yourself and anyone not in your immediate family. Please regularly use the provided hand sanitizers, wash your hands, greet people joyfully without physical contact, and use safe practices when interacting.
6. Check with the Center for Disease Control and or the Vermont Department of Health (healthvermont.gov) for the latest information on the spread and the best practices we are expected to uphold.

Worship

1. Because it is impossible to physically distance in a way that safely accommodates the entire congregation for the foreseeable future, worship attendance will continue to be entirely online.
2. As restrictions are lifted, we will begin to have smaller groups help us record the worship service, to be streamed later. A member of our Worship Team will be coordinating participants when this time comes.
3. If you participate in the filming of worship, you will be expected to follow all of the building guidelines (above).
4. Because singing is one of the easiest ways to spread the virus, following the recommendations of the American Choral Directors Association, there will be no communal singing for the foreseeable future.

Individual singers and family groups can participate in filming worship, provided that their spaces are disinfected between singers, and no one sings in the same physical locations in the same day.

Team Life

1. All groups, church, and community teams will be asked to abide by the guidelines above.
2. In order to facilitate participation for everyone, **the default process for gathering will be meeting virtually**, via Zoom or telephone. All church activities will go through one of the church's two Zoom accounts. To set up a meeting, contact office@firstchurchburlington.org.
3. If your group is fewer than 15 people, and is able to meet outside, and all members of the team or committee are able to participate in this way, you may do so. Please note, this makes remote participation very difficult for those who may still need to practice isolation. Remote meetings will be the default for this reason.
4. All groups, church, and community members will abide by advisories from the Vermont Department of Health on church grounds and in church structures.
If the VT. Dept. of Health changes its guidelines and says that small groups should not be meeting, then all groups and teams will be asked to meet virtually.
5. If you meet physically, even outside, we ask that after your meeting you spend a minute or two sanitizing all affected areas, including doorknobs, chairs and hard surfaces, as folks will likely use the restrooms and enter the building for resources.
6. Each group is required to report to the Church Office if there is anyone in their group who has contracted the Coronavirus in a timely manner.

Office and Building Protocol

1. The Church Office will be staffed for regular hours beginning next week, May 26, Tuesday through Friday: 10am to 3pm.
2. In order to better safeguard the health of our office staff and ensure the guidelines are observed, the front door of the building will remain locked. Please ring the bell for entry.
3. Any staff who is able to work from home will continue to do so as often as possible. Please be gracious with them in this time!
4. Bathroom use will be restricted to the accessible bathroom on the first floor, in order to facilitate regular, thorough cleaning.
5. Building and Grounds is scheduling more regular cleaning and disinfecting of the whole building.
6. When in the building, staff will use the provided hand sanitizer both when you come in and when you leave the office.
7. Staff and volunteers will be asked to sanitize all equipment they use.

Pastoral Care

Social isolation, too, is a risk in times like these. Yet, technology has allowed us the ability to connect in different ways - ***this is an opportunity for us to learn to connect in new ways – help us take advantage of it!***

1. Our clergy may continue to call or e-mail you instead of visiting you personally.
2. Beginning next week, on Wednesday from 2-4, Elissa will hold “drive-by” office hours in the parking lot. Come for an (appropriately distanced) visit!
3. Our Partners in Pastoral Care will not be conducting visits, but will call more often instead.
4. Members and friends should call others they know are isolated, living alone or at risk.
5. *Friends at First* are asked to continue to check in with members and friends by phone.
6. If our seniors need food or medicine purchased so they can stay safe at home, then we will have younger folks helping out. Call (802.862.5010) or [email \(office@firstchurchburlington.org\)](mailto:office@firstchurchburlington.org) the Church Office if you

need help. To volunteer to participate in these care-giving activities, you can call the Church Office, or [click here](#).

Possibility Shop and Renters

*First Church provides many services to precisely the populations who are hardest hit by social distancing strategies. As such, we have worked hard to create a set of guidelines that allows for these services to **SAFELY** continue for the time being.*

1. The **Possibility Shop will remain closed for the time being**, and **will not be taking donations** for the foreseeable future.
2. The sanctuary will be reserved for the church activities outlined above, in order to maintain greater control over its sanitation.
3. JUMP is currently working on a remote service model. Should they return to in-person contact, they will likely work with a drive-by service model, with clients waiting outside.
4. Small Potatoes has moved outside, and is serving pre-packaged food, rather than having clients serve themselves.
5. AA, Al-Anon, and Narcotics Anonymous are not currently meeting, but will re-evaluate as things continue to open up. Should they begin to gather, they will be expected to follow all the guidelines above, and help sanitize the building after use.
6. Our third-floor renters are in charge of their own cleaning and disinfecting, and will be expected to follow all of the building guidelines (above).
7. All groups will abide by advisories from the Vermont Department of Health on church grounds and in church structures, and will discontinue if recommended by the state.

This is not a comprehensive list of all activities at this time, and we expect that many of these guidelines may change with some regularity over the next few months. To this end, the Trustees have helped pull together a Covid-19 Reopening Task Force, composed of members from Worship, Deacons, Building and Grounds and Personnel. We anticipate that this pandemic will continue to necessitate changes in the way we are the church – sometimes even in surprisingly positive ways! We will continue to keep you up-to-date, but do ask that you please continue to regularly check our website's [Covid-19 response page](#) for updates.

In a press briefing in late March, I remember a reporter asking Governor Phil Scott how he planned on enforcing his ban on gatherings of more than 10 people. His response was simply to reiterate, "I have tremendous faith in Vermonters and our ability to follow these guidelines, to save lives and support each other throughout..." His response would have been laughable in any other place; in Vermont, it was fact. We care about each other and are committed to ensuring the health and safety of everyone – enforcement is a secondary concern. I know other churches are struggling with impatience; the news is full of incidents where churches have opened, to deadly results. I, for one, am glad to be serving with you all, where I know you will join me in placing the highest value on the lives of all our community. We are stronger when we work together, and I dare say our faith is stronger, too.

In gratitude,



[The Rev. Elissa Johnk](#)