

Rev. Elissa Johnk,
Lead Minister

Dear First Church Friends –

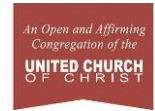
In her sermon on workplace relationships this winter, Elissa called worship our “staff meeting.” It is the place we come to “*discuss the issues at hand, encourage one another, and equip ourselves for our particular jobs – spreading the love of God, serving God in the world, each in our respective assignments.*” It has been just over three months since we were able to physically gather for “staff meeting”.

Yet, we want to be clear: First Church is not, nor has ever been *closed*. We have continued to worship, to pray, to connect, and to be equipped to serve in new and creative ways. Only our building has closed, and the church is not a building. As Jesus repeatedly reminds us, church is meant to go with us wherever we are ([Mark 14:58](#)). In this respect Christians are perhaps living more fully into the gospel than any time since the first century.

But we know you miss gathering in person as much as we do. Singing together, breaking bread together: these are some of the things that have been integral to our understanding of what it means to be the church together. Last month, on behalf of the Trustees, Elissa pulled together a small Task Force to spear-head our physical Re-Opening efforts. This group, comprised of members of Building and Grounds, Staff, Deacons (Worship), and Personnel, has been immersed in studying the science and best practices of getting us back together physically.

This is not a simple issue, as you might expect. How do we navigate narrow doorways, elevators, stairwells, bathrooms, a congested front desk, and the requirement to constantly disinfect? What does worship look like with everyone masked? No singing. No communion. No childcare. No children’s church school. No greeting one another. No fellowship hour. No coffee, tea or bagels. No name tags. No bulletins. No Bibles. No offering plate or passing the peace. It's complicated.

In addition, of course, is the reality that even with all these precautions the best advice science and medicine can give usⁱ says that folks with higher risks should still stay away. Diabetes? Asthma? COPD? An auto-immune disorder? Anyone in your family at higher risk? Then gathering is not for you. Not only does this create difficulties for several staff and lay leaders, it also means that gathering back together too early creates a steeply-tiered system for worship that flies in the face of our theology of welcome and inclusiveness. What comes out of staff meeting with only half the team? In this, the church is different from many other organizations. What is worship with only the young and perfectly healthy? Not anything Jesus would recognize.



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Because of all of this, the Task Force is recommending at this time that our primary worship – Sunday morning at 10 am – remain online until September. Could this change with new information? Absolutely. Yet, as much as we miss gathering physically, we know that our worship has remained strong and vibrant in these past few months, and we are reconnecting with folks we haven't seen in years. Worship has undertaken new forms of participation and creativity, and we haven't experienced the drop-off in attendance we often see during these busy early-summer months.

This does not mean that the building will remain closed all summer. When the Governor's guidelines change again to allow slightly larger groups, we do envision that we will begin to experiment with other forms of worship outside of our 10am service. Things like prayer gatherings, vigils, recitals in the garden, and holy hiking are all feasible with careful planning and consideration. We also anticipate that gatherings like AA and Al-Anon will consider resuming. Together with the staff and Trustees, we are working hard to ensure that everything is done safely and with our mission in mind.

We know that Christianity is rare amongst the major religions for the emphasis it places on the physical body, and we appreciate your patience with us as we consider how to best nurture our physical and spiritual selves in this time. If you have any questions about the process, please email any member of the Task Force. If you, or anyone you know, is in need – spiritually or physically – we hope you will consider reaching out to [Elissa](#) or [Hannah](#) or any member of our [Partners in Pastoral Care Team](#).

In faith,

The members of the Task Force for Re-Opening:

[Ann Vivian](#), [Bob McKearin](#), [Caroline Catlin](#), [Doug Viehmann](#), [Hilah Clarke](#)

[Vermont Conference UCC – Letter from Conference Minister - the Rev. Lynn Bujnak](#)

[UUA Guidance on Gathering In-Person When COVID-19 Subsides](#)

[Returning to Church – Wisconsin Council of Churches](#)

[Vermont Health Department – Corona Virus Covid-19 Information](#)