

"We will serve communion in pre-torn pieces, we won't shake hands for the passing of the peace, and we have hand sanitizer in the pews. I think we have a good plan in place."

-Elissa Johnk, Trustees, 5/10/2020



I have heard it suggested that a pillar of wisdom is learning to laugh at yourself. If this is true, some of us should be emerging from these last 15 months like Solomon. None of us knew what was in store, of course, but for quite some time it has felt as if we were constructing a raft while already floating down the rapids, praying there aren't larger waterfalls ahead.

It is in this vein that I am cautiously, yet faithfully, and certainly JOYFULLY writing today to announce that it appears we might be approaching a more easily navigable patch of river ahead.

Starting on Sundays June 20 and 27, your Trustees and Deacons will begin the first stages of our [PEACE](#) re-gathering process, by physically attending a live-streamed worship, and ensuring we have all the appropriate procedures and precautions in place for a wider re-gathering. During this time, you can continue to access worship at 10am on Sunday morning on our [Youtube Channel](#). Please be patient with us, as we learn (yet another!) new way of doing things!

If all goes well, we will be able to welcome into the building anyone who wishes to physically attend worship on Sunday, July 4!

Worship will continue to be live-streamed on [YouTube](#)!

How are we going about this, you ask? Well, last month we sent out a questionnaire asking how you are feeling about physically re-gathering. Like many churches across the country, the results were split. 63% of you were gung-ho to be back in the building yesterday (and not shy about telling us to quit dallying!); 37% of you, however, were less ready. There were also several of you who indicated you would not likely come back physically at all, as you have moved, but have so appreciated being able to continue to worship.

The results for team re-gathering were similar, but more pronounced. Roughly 55% of you were eager to return to in-person gathering, and 45% simply were not. Some of you felt the virtual meetings were more effective, and easier to attend. Others felt that you were more wary of attending an in-person meeting, as you weren't sure who would be ensuring social distancing and masking were enforced.

Live-Streaming Worship: We are so grateful to have had the resources and time to research, purchase and install new AV equipment in the Sanctuary to enable high quality live-streaming of worship. Please know that we are committed to maintaining excellent online worship not just for the near future, but always.

Your Covid Re-gathering Team, as well as your Board of Deacons, have taken all of this into account, and are putting forward revised guidelines, to help us do this as best as we know how. (Remember the raft metaphor).

The full guidelines are [here](#), but the highlights are as follows:

1. ***Yes, masks will still be required inside, and outside in groups.*** Why?

Think of First Church as you would a hospital setting, as it is obvious there why masks are essential. We are a community with folks young and old, with kidney conditions, and lung conditions, and liver conditions, and autoimmune conditions, and... you get the point. Many of us still have doctors who are advising us to *wash our bananas*. You read that right. Compromised health means the vaccine didn't help you develop antibodies, young age means that the vaccine isn't available to you, and on and on. It is simply not yet considered safe for many of us – *or any member of their household* – to be in places without masks.

It would be un-Christian to exclude from our communal life these families when inclusion is easily available.

As one UCC Conference Minister put it: “While the church is indeed a public space, not all public spaces are the same. Not all public spaces declare themselves to be the Body of Christ as churches do. Consequently, not all public spaces are as concerned about the common health of ALL who share the space.”

2. ***Yes, masks are still required, even if everyone in your group is vaccinated.*** Why?

Our survey results indicate this is a sensitive topic. The first and most obvious reason is that others *will* be using the space who may or may not be vaccinated. The second, however, is that it would be unfair to ask individuals to share their medical conditions, in order to ask others to stay masked.

3. ***Because of numbers 1 and 2, the default for all Team Meetings will continue to be virtual.***

If a team decides to gather in person, a fully-functional virtual option must be available. Please note that outdoor options for virtual meetings are severely limited.

4. ***Physical distancing is expected during worship.***

Hugs! Everyone wants to give hugs! We know you do – because we do, too. Alas, for the time being, for all the reasons listed above, we are going to ask that you continue to observe basic distancing, erring always on the side of caution for the most vulnerable – remembering you don't always know from appearances who the most vulnerable are.

5. ***Registration for worship will not be required,*** but we will take your name and contact information for the purposes of contact tracing.

6. **Childcare:** We are still working out the details, but we do believe we will be able to have *childcare available* during the 10 am worship hour.

7. **For the time being, there WILL be music, but no congregational singing.**

We know this is perhaps the most challenging for all of us. At this point, however, there is not positive research on how much the increased droplets from group singing would affect our most vulnerable folks. In order to make worship available without a bouncer checking for vaccination cards at the door, we are following the [State of Vermont recommendation](#) asking faith communities to use alternatives to congregational singing.

I assure you we are all very much watching the science and the data on this. Your re-gathering team is half made up of members of the choir! We also want to assure you that our Summer Music Coordinator, the lovely Ms. Ana Ruesink!, has put together a collection of sweet and sacred sounds – with your help – that will faithfully and beautifully enrich and guide our worship for the next 15 weeks.

8. **The First Church Office** will resume its regular Tuesday – Friday 10-3 hours, beginning on Tuesday, June 15th. In order to help ensure compliance with these guidelines, however, the building will remain locked, and you will be asked to ring the bell to enter.

Again, we strongly recommend you read our full guidelines [here](#). From them, you will see that we remain committed to nurturing our virtual worshippers, and growing our digital reach – not just in the immediate future, but from now on. Additionally, the Covid Re-Gathering Team is fully committed to meeting at least once a month to stay up to date with the latest local, state, and denominational guidance, and we appreciate your patience. Although the water may feel steadier, we are still creating this raft as we go.

Then again, this is what all life is, even without a pandemic, isn't it? One call from a doctor is enough to teach us that lesson. But this year, we have had to take this lesson a bit more seriously, haven't we? Community, ritual, structure, even value, all of these are things that are constructed, each and every day, as the current pushes us on. Some parts of the raft are inherited, and seem to be holding up so well that we don't even notice them, others tore off a mile ago, and we're just now noticing! Life is an act of continuous creation.

So thank you, for helping us build something beautiful, together.

In faith,



[The Rev. Elissa Johnk](#), Lead Minister