On Wednesday, May 13, 2020, First Church of Christ, Congregational, United Church of Christ, in North Conway, New Hampshire, made the public announcement that the congregation had called Rev. John Hogue to be the next settled Pastor and Teacher of the church. It was a day longer in coming than any of us could have known back in February.

I want to commend at the outset the leadership team of First Church for their willingness to do a new thing: Moderator Carl Lindblade; Vice Moderator Karen Umberger; Clerk Jennifer Perkins; Search Team Coordinator Ken Schiller (also chair of Diaconate) and team members Lee Coffield (Diaconate), Laurel Ekberg, Julie James (Diaconate), Peter Magg (also Treasurer), Jenni Terry, and Glenna Tibbetts; Diaconate members Linda Derse, Helen Goss, and Robert Porter; Gerry Tilton, Licensed Minister; Floyd Corson, Organist; Anne Polak, Choir Director; Muriel Magg, Associate Organist (Diaconate); and members of the Chancel Choir contributed to making this happen in varying ways. Rev. Dr. Michael Carrier, New Hampshire Conference Search and Call Consultant, provided valuable insight along the way, as did Rev. Gordon Rankin, New Hampshire Conference Minister, and Rev. Richard Slater, Associate Conference Minister, NHCUCC. Many of the people listed played more than one role, and while I am ecstatic that the interim process is reaching its conclusion, I am going to miss this entire team very much.

Synopsis:
- Our March 28-29 candidate weekend was postponed to May 2-3.
- Plan A was to recreate the in-person schedule on the new weekend.
  - The in-person schedule:
    - Saturday, March 28, as scheduled, individual conversations in person or by phone
    - Saturday, March 28, 2:00-4:00PM, Meet and Greet Reception for the Candidate and his family in the Vestry
    - Sunday, March 29, 10:00AM, Worship service led by Rev. John Hogue, Candidate, with Coffee Hour to follow
    - Noon: Question and Answer session with the Candidate and Search Team, followed by a congregational vote
  - Plan B was to move everything online except the vote, which would be via US MAIL. This is what was ultimately required.
  - The virtual schedule:
    - Week of April 27: Individual conversations with the Candidate as requested, by ZOOM, FaceTime, or phone
    - May 1: Ballots mailed
    - Saturday, May 2, 2:00-4:00PM, Virtual Meet and Greet via ZOOM with the Candidate and his family
• Sunday, May 3, 10:00AM, Online Worship with Communion, led by Rev. John Hogue, Candidate, premiered on YouTube
• 11:15-11:50AM: Virtual Coffee Hour via ZOOM
• Noon-1:00PM: Virtual Question and Answer via ZOOM
• Tuesday, May 5-Monday, May 11: Ballots received and verified
• Monday, May 11, 1:00PM: Ballots counted
• Wednesday, May 14: Announcement of Call made

The Back Story
The Search Team had been diligently interviewing candidates since August 2019, primarily using Skype as the platform. Back then, the seven-member team could be together in one room at the church as much as possible or, if necessary, members could join from other locations. Virtual first interviews have become the norm, if not the standard, in search and call.

In January and early February, the team invited three candidates for neutral pulpits and for in-person interviews, tours of the church campus, and a general orientation to the area. After the third of these three experiences, the team recommended Rev. Hogue to the congregation as the candidate and a weekend of activities, culminating with a congregational vote, was planned for March 28-29, 2020. A formal call to meet for the vote on March 29 went out the last week in February. Excitement and curiosity built.

At this same time, we were watching the pandemic as it ravaged other countries. New York City and Boston were just starting to see cases, but our ski areas were still open. We were hopeful that SARS-CoV-2 and its disease, COVID-19, would not cause much disruption to our plans. Then worship suspensions began in other states.

We had preliminary talks about if we might suspend worship for a week or two, thinking that the schools around us could provide guidance. Our on-site daycare and pre-school took measures to assure the safety of staff and children; the professionals watched the public school decisions carefully with the idea that if the local schools closed, the center would also close. Fryeburg Academy next door in Maine announced its closure for the rest of March around March 12. Our local district announced the same at 9:00PM on Saturday, March 14. Our daycare and preschool would be closed. Could we in good conscience keep worshiping together?

Sunday, March 15, I scrapped the planned sermon and used the time for community conversation. It would have been so easy for those assembled to have said, in essence, we need to keep worshiping together at least until March 29 or at least through Easter or until the state tells us we shouldn’t or can’t. But the collective decision, thoughtfully arrived at, was to cancel in-person worship for at least March 22 and March 29 and to postpone Candidate Weekend to May 2-3. There were two lines of thought at work there: one was that we could be worshiping together by that point and the other was that if we weren’t, maybe it was a sign to slow the final steps of the search process until later in the summer when things would be normal again.
One member in attendance suggested an alternative to waiting which proved unworkable, but his suggestion got many others thinking and led to our solution.

**Planning for an Unknowable Future**

Within a week, we knew at least that “normal” would not be happening for a while and that we had the opportunity—and a willing candidate—to do something new and different if it became necessary. The leadership created Plan A, which was to do everything on May 2 and 3 as it had originally been planned for March 28 and 29. They also created Plan B, which was to make everything virtual using ZOOM and YouTube, followed by a mail-in balloting process. We also had a provision for a hybrid plan so that if we had been able to gather in person with some safety, those who wouldn’t have been able to for health and safety reasons could still participate in at least some of the planned activities.

A letter explaining these plans was mailed to the congregation with the announcement of the postponed date and the information was included in the monthly newsletter, as well. Leadership set mid-April as the point at which we would need to decide on Plan A or Plan B if we had no specific guidance from state or local officials. As it happened, the “Stay at Home” order originally set to expire on May 4 was extended around that time to May 15, so we had our decision made for us.

**Logistics: Meeting the Candidate**

The technological pieces required for this virtual plan meant that as the resident technology specialist, I had to be directly involved in the whole weekend. (This is definitely not the norm for an interim pastor.) I set up the ZOOM Meet and Greet session for Saturday and the ZOOM Q&A session after our usual ZOOM Virtual Coffee Hour on Sunday. The login information for these two meetings was sent out in the newsletter to every member and the Diaconate made phone calls to every member making sure that they knew that they could participate by video or by phone in those meetings. The coordinator of the Search Team handled calls by appointment with the candidate for staff members and for members of the congregation for whom ZOOM was not going to work (in addition to rescheduling those postponed from March).

As the weekend approached, e-mail reminders were sent with login information for each meeting. “Saturday Virtual Meet and Greet” was delivered on Friday. “Sunday Worship Link, Virtual Coffee Hour, and Virtual Q&A” was delivered Saturday after the Meet and Greet concluded.

The Meet and Greet was informal and we encouraged people to think of it as a come-and-go reception rather than a two-hour meeting. I opened the event on ZOOM, turned off my camera, muted the audio, and walked away. In retrospect, we could have chosen to make someone else the host, but our thinking was that if people were having technical trouble, they could call or text me and if I were still “present” in the ZOOM meeting, I could help them more easily.
Feedback about this format broke along introvert/extrovert lines pretty evenly. It was chaotic for a few of the most introverted people but lively and engaging for most of the extroverts. I hear the same things about in-person receptions, so I think this went about as well as we could have expected. It may have been helpful to have a host who every once in a while assured that everyone had a chance to speak with the candidate, but reactions to that as a recommendation have been mixed as I’ve asked people what they’d advise other churches.

I did the same for Virtual Coffee Hour.

For the Q&A, the structure was more formal. The Moderator ran the meeting while I unmuted and muted questioners and checked in with the phone-in participants whose raised hands we could not see. When we arrived at the decision that I needed to be more present, the feeling was that church members needed/wanted to be focused on the content of the meeting, not managing participants. Upon reflection an hour was a bit too long; the consensus recommendation is to aim for 45 minutes, with about half an hour for the candidate to field questions and 15 minutes for the Search Team to do the same. I think having a designated manager for microphone control is an important piece of any virtual meeting with more than about 15 people who aren’t professionals used to doing business virtually; I also think the right call was made to allow all church members to focus on the content. It would be great for the manager NOT to be the Interim Pastor, however. This meeting was recorded, as it was a called meeting of the church; the recording on file will be considered the minutes of the meeting.

The Candidate Worship Service

First Church posts prerecorded worship services on YouTube which premier at 10:00 on Sunday mornings. We do so primarily because we don’t have the bandwidth to live-stream well (yet). Our candidate could have done a live-stream from his home, but in conversation with the Search Team and with the Diaconate, he decided that he would like to be ensconced in our “regular” worship service just as he would have been in person.

Our worship team put together their usual pieces using his service outline, Rev. Hogue made videos of all of his portions of the service, and I bore the tremendous responsibility of not messing up someone else’s professional “audition” as I edited everything together. This included communion at home. He trusted us, and especially me, to integrate his leadership as seamlessly as possible; I am grateful to God that this was May 3 and not March 29 because I had learned a lot in five weeks! I am also thankful for his message, which I listened to three times in the course of editing, because what he said helped me get over the wall of exhaustion I saw looming in front of me.

Candidates often have expectations of confidentiality that virtual worship could obliterate: did Rev. Hogue want the service to be unlisted, thus available only with the link? He chose to trust the Holy Spirit, so the service is and has been available publicly on the First Church YouTube Channel. As is our usual practice, the direct link to the
service was sent out in e-mail and posted to the church’s Facebook page; we also announced his candidacy in our local newspaper ad. Everything worked exactly as planned, much to our collective relief.

**The Vote**
Part of the interim work the church accomplished was a database and directory update. The update was published in January 2020, which meant that we had a clean roster of members from which to work for creating the mailing list and the ballot verification process.

The ballot was a simple yes or no single question. These were printed on colored paper, four ballots to an 8.5”x11” sheet. Ballots of that size fold nicely to fit into small (3.5”x5”) envelopes for return mail. Inside the outgoing envelope was a letter explaining the procedure, a ballot for each church member at the address, and a self-addressed, stamped envelope in which to return the ballot(s). For tracking purposes, the return envelope also had the name(s) and address of the member(s) from which it was returned, much as absentee ballots in the State of New Hampshire do.

Our church administrator and I collected returned envelopes and kept count of the numbers returned. I’m happy to say that of all the ballots received, only one was folded in such a way as to reveal the choice when it was taken out of the envelope and placed in the collection bin. One member did not receive a ballot due to problems with US Mail delivery and notified us as soon as it became clear that this member’s vote would not be recorded without an alternate option; the Clerk of the Church called this member to receive the vote confidentially before the tallying began.

Four members of the church were assembled to do the counting at the discretion of the Moderator and Vice Moderator, who along with the Clerk and the coordinator of the Search Team observed the count. The tellers were not members of the Profile or Search Teams and none were related to each other.

The Moderator and the coordinator of the Search Team met via ZOOM with the candidate to tell him the good news. An e-mail was sent to the Search Team and the Diaconate with the result of the vote and staff members were called directly. Once Rev. Hogue had notified his current church’s leadership and conference, the Search Team made the official announcement.

**The Candidate’s Insight from Rev. John Hogue:**
Be patient! Listen with mindfulness. Be prepared for Zoom fatigue! I had it after Question and Answer period. I did notice some folks were frustrated when they wanted to speak; [they were] prepared to be patient on their end but I let Mr. Lindblade know who wanted to speak.

**Next Steps: Goodbye and Hello**
Rev. Hogue arrives mid-August. We have no idea what our worship situation will be at that time or how First Church will adapt rituals of saying goodbye and saying hello to
this particular time. Other congregations have done and will do these things; I expect both Rev. Hogue and I will be gathering ideas for how to do well our respective parts here at First Church—and he to depart from his current congregation and me to arrive at my next—from colleagues in the next month or so.

Other Reflections

• The Search Team had met Rev. Hogue and seen him preach in person. Had the team not already been through that stage, they don’t know that they would have been comfortable endorsing this virtual process.
• Rev. Hogue made two other sermons available to the church online when it became clear that he could not be here in person, which multiple people found helpful in their discernment process.
• Offering one-on-one conversations with the candidate was already a part of the plan for March 28-29, but these became particularly important when the process moved online. The opportunity to have a conversation, even briefly, by phone or video without other distractions was key for several people whose questions were not necessarily ones they wanted everyone to hear; even at a reception, it is often possible to have slightly more privacy than it is in an open forum. (Consolidated from several people’s feedback)
• “I, and many others thought the time of questioning was more relaxed. Everyone was in a place where they felt comfortable, either at home or elsewhere. Working from a relaxed atmosphere, made asking even the most uncomfortable questions easier. It wasn’t like an inquisition as I have felt in other candidate settings. The voting process was well planned especially for those who normally would not have been able to ‘come to church’ physically anyway. Publicity was key to have as many folks on board to participate as possible. No one was left out. The whole process from preparing the profile to doing the search, was well executed. Having two different committees made a huge difference. People didn’t get ‘burned out.’” (Gerry Tilton, Licensed Minister)