

## **Things To Be Considered in Discerning When and How to Resume In-Person Worship**

***No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.*** In a great many of our United Church of Christ congregations these words are uttered every single week. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, these words have taken on some even broader meaning. We are now even clearer that the "here" we refer to is not the physical buildings where we gather for worship, study and fellowship. Rather, the "here" in which we are welcomed is the spiritual embrace of our faith community, no matter where and how it is gathered. And while we have always understood creating safe space as an essential part of creating such welcome, this too has taken on new meaning, when it is our physical proximity to one another that creates risk to that safe space. Yes, the words are familiar but there are now more things we need to consider to live them out.

In these recent days when our churches have not been holding in-person worship, one thing has been very evident: we long for connection with one another. Yet, as we look forward to days when we can reconnect in ways that feel more familiar, we must recognize that the context in which we worship and minister is different. Eventually, the crisis will diminish, but risk will continue for a good time to come. It is daunting to realize, but the decisions we make about how to be church in these days can have life and death consequences. To ignore this reality means we are not taking seriously our imperative to create safe space for one another. Not all is in our control, but we must be thoughtful and faithful about when and how we resume our in-person church connections, so that those in our congregations and wider community are kept as safe as possible.

To this end, the following is a list of things for church leaders to consider when discerning when and how to resume in-person worship and church activities:

### **Be Patient**

- ❖ **The preparation and circulation of this document is not meant to signal an "all clear"**. To the contrary, the intent of this document is to remind us just how many things will need to be considered before resuming in-person gatherings. Things will not return to normal any time soon. Normal has changed. Our task as church is to figure out how to do what we do within this changed world. It will undoubtedly take rich dialogue, innovative thinking, and bold decision making. It will also take time.

- ❖ **This will need to be a staged return.** We have seen how our Federal Government has articulated this as a strategy for “re-opening” our society. We as church will need to take a similar approach. The reality at the heart of this is that the more we interact with one another, the more the risk increases. Not everything in the life of the church should resume in an in-person manner all at the same time. Given the full range of considerations, the leadership of our churches will need to set some priorities for what church activities resume when. For example, perhaps we discern safe ways to hold delayed funerals even before we feel it is appropriate to resume in-person Sunday worship. There may also be other activities that traditionally have a lot of people in confined space, such as church fairs, that may need to be postponed a great many months or held in a very modified way to be safe.

## Be Informed

- ❖ **Follow the advice of local health officials, the Center for Disease Control and the World Health Organization.** It is easy to become overwhelmed and confused by all the competing information these days. This is a health crisis, and we should be looking to those who specialize in community health to provide the clearest guidance. Listening to local health officials is a key component, as in a pandemic such as this, health risk can be getting better in some places while getting worse in others.
- ❖ **The New Hampshire Conference and the national setting of the United Church of Christ are trying to offer you every possible resource to help you discern how to be church during these uncertain days.** The Conference’s Staying Safe in the Midst of Contagious Disease page (<http://nhcucc.org/caring-for-congregations/staying-safe-in-the-midst-of-contagious-disease>) and the UCC’s Coronavirus and the Church page (<https://www.ucc.org/coronavirus#header4>) provide a variety of resources from information on new legislation, to webinar videos, to clergy self-care tips, and to help with producing on-line worship.

## Be Aware

- ❖ **Not everyone is going to return at once.** It is nice to imagine a triumphant day when everyone gathers back in church. That is unlikely to be the way things happen. First, there are those in our churches who are at higher risk of health complication if they contract Covid-19. They should be staying at home for a good while to come and we as their faith communities need to find ways to support and spiritually nurture them as they do. Secondly, those returning are likely to have mixed feelings. Some will find great joy in returning to the comfort of the pews. Others may be reticent, perhaps even scared, to return. We need to make sure to extend our welcome to everyone whenever we determine it is a safe, appropriate time for them to return.

- ❖ **Not everyone will look after their own best self-interest.** It would be great to be able to assume that, in a health crisis such as we now face, that everyone will look after the interests of their own health. Experience teaches us otherwise. There will be those who have high-risk factors who will feel pressured to be present at in-person worship simply because we open the doors. This makes decision making more complicated as it is the responsibility of church leadership to look after the welfare of the whole community. One of the ways we can make sure we support those in high-risk demographics is by not discontinuing our alternative forms of worship, study and fellowship when some in the community are able to return to attending such function in person.
- ❖ **Appreciation for some of the alternative ways you have been doing ministry may have developed.** While we long to be back in our sanctuaries, the truth is many in our congregations have found deep meaning in our alternative practices. Just because there will be joy when we are able to worship with one another in person again, it does not mean there will not also be a sense of loss if and when alternative practices are discontinued. Good leaders will be cautious about assumptions and will take the time to listen to where the community is finding meaning. There will likely need to be some blending and balancing (which will be unique for every congregation). There will also need to be intentional conversation about stewardship of time, energy and resources.

## **Be Prepared**

- ❖ **We will continue to need to modify aspects of worship and church activities until a vaccine is available.** Our return to our sanctuaries will not be a return to the way we worshipped at the beginning of the year. We will still need to engage in practices that reduce risk. We should not be passing communally touched items (offering plates, communion trays, microphones, etc.). Passing of the Peace and Greeting Lines should not involve touching and should involve some physical distancing. Choir members during anthems and children during children's messages will need to be encouraged to remain appropriate distance from one another. There should be no laying on of hands at Ordinations or Confirmations. Church activities also ought to involve attention to physical distancing and we may have to choose not to resume some activities because such distancing can't be practiced. When we resume in-person gatherings, our care for one another will be repeatedly demonstrated in vigilance in keeping one another safe. While we may not be able to do everything as we did it before, there is rich opportunity for finding meaning in new rituals and traditions.

- ❖ **Congregational self-assessment of your unique risk factors, and responding to those risk factors, is going to be critical.** Every congregation is unique. Each has its own physical set up, staffing, traditions, and demographic makeup. Such things will impact the decisions you will need to make as a congregation to keep one another safe. Utilize the insights of parish nurses and/or medical professionals in your congregation to assist church leadership in assessing such risk factors. Be attentive to where you may need to implement new safe church practices or revise current ones. Consider how and when use of personal protective equipment (such as gloves or masks) may be necessary and be sure to have such items readily available. And please – PLEASE – be accommodating of the individual health needs of your staff and not just assume that it is safe for staff to resume engaging in all activities as they have done in the past.
- ❖ **This is unlikely to be a linear process.** Both history and science teach us that the Covid-19 pandemic is unlikely to be a continuing progression of improvement. There will be flare ups, some localized and some broader. We need to have our congregations prepared practically and spiritually for times when we may again need to discontinue in-person worship.
- ❖ **You have made new connections. But they may not follow you back to in-person worship.** While holding worship on-line, many of our churches have made new connections and had new folk become part of their worshiping community. Your community may well have become a new spiritual home for these people. However, there may also be reasons why they have found on-line worship accessible to them in a way that in-person worship is not. This creates a unique, new pastoral care dilemma for us. What is our responsibility for care and connection with those who have connected with us on-line when we return to in-person worship?
- ❖ **Your pastors and staff are going to need time off.** Our pastors and church staffs have been working tirelessly to minister to the needs of your congregations during this time of health crisis. Many have had to learn new forms of media to safely connect during this time. When it is safe and appropriate to resume in-person worship, congregants are naturally going to want their pastors and staff in worship with them. Many churches will have a backlog of funerals and/or weddings which will need to be scheduled. There are huge expectations on our pastors and church staff right now and they have been doing an amazing job of rising to the moment. But our pastors and staff members are human beings and they will need to find time in the midst of all of this to rest, rejuvenate and to deal with their own griefs and losses. Church leaders (particularly Pastoral Relations and Staff Relations Committees) need to support pastors and staff in taking days off and vacation time even during this ongoing crisis.

- ❖ **The responsibilities of leadership have shifted.** Even when it seems safe and appropriate to resume in-person worship, things will not return to normal. The world around us has changed and we, as church, will need to adapt to those changes. This is likely to take a different type of leadership than was anticipated when our current church leaders were elected into their roles. Some will welcome the opportunity to practice adaptive leadership. Others may recognize that the gifts and skills they have to offer are not the ones needed for this day. New leaders may present themselves who are drawn to this moment. Churches should be prepared for the reality that it is common for there to be some leadership shift in times such as we currently face.

## **Be Faithful**

- ❖ **Don't lose sight of core values.** As United Church of Christ congregations we hold certain things as core to our identity and belief. Chief of these is our commitment to extravagant hospitality, inclusiveness, transformative ministry and continuing to respond to the voice of the Still Speaking God. How we will live out these core values may need to be adapted, but our commitment to them should not waver. Our decision-making ought to be rooted and grounded in these things that we hold dear.
- ❖ **Listen to the whispers of the Spirit.** These are most certainly unfamiliar and uncertain days, but the Biblical narrative reassures us that our God is ever-present at such time. Our task is to still our anxieties and need for control enough that we are able to listen for the comfort and guidance God's Spirit has to provide. Pray often. Listen more often. Steep yourself in the love of our God at all times.