

Not Yet...And I Don't Know When

Nearly twenty years ago, my wife and I entered the adoption process. At our very first orientation with our adoption agency, we were given pin-on buttons that said, "Not Yet and Don't Ask." The idea was that there are so many times through the adoption process when you are asked when your child will arrive that you have the button to provide the answer for you. To be honest, when I first received that button, I thought it rather rude. I came to appreciate it more as our adoption process moved forward. Just a couple weeks after we received a profile with information and a couple of pictures of the young girl we were to adopt, SARS struck in China. Both the United States and Chinese governments said we were not allowed to travel to China to pick her up. I was heartbroken. The delay was excruciating. It was also absolutely necessary.

In my role as Conference Minister, I am asked several times a day the question "When do you think we will be able to resume in-person worship?" I find myself more and more giving an answer similar to that which was on that adoption button, "Not yet...and I don't know when." It seems the most honest answer I can give. It breaks my heart a little every time I need to say it. But I also believe it is necessary.

So I know there is a lot of talk right now about churches "reopening". So you may rightly wonder why I would say "Not yet". Here is my thinking:

- First, we have had some changes with regard to public health and Covid-19. We now better understand transmission of the virus. There are also some places around the state where we are seeing declines in cases of the disease. But one very important thing that has not changed at all is that churches (and other faith communities) remain a very high-risk location for transmission. The Center for Disease Control has referred to churches as "super spreaders". Because of the numbers we gather in, what we do when we are together and how we do it, churches are incubators for wide-scale community infection with this virus. Not only has the CDC documented specific cases but, as churches in some communities have begun to resume in person worship (even in modified ways), there has been plenty of anecdotal evidence as well.
- Given the high-risk factor of viral spread in church communities, it is clear that when we resume in-person worship our services will need to be highly modified. Unless there are marked changes in testing and tracing or treatment, our services will likely need to remain significantly modified until there is a publicly accessible vaccine. Based on the CDC's Interim Guidelines for Faith Communities and the current conversations occurring in Governor Sununu's Reopening Task Force, such modifications are likely to include limiting the size of worship gatherings, marking seating locations out in tape to promote social distancing, propping doors open throughout the entire gathering (clearly more

problematic in the winter), requiring masks be worn by staff and the congregation, abstaining from physical contact, avoiding use of commonly touched items, vigorous cleaning routines and restriction on how and when food may be served. Further, it seems that Governor Sununu will be expecting denominations (in conjunction with their insurance carriers) to provide guidelines regarding liturgical matters such as abstaining from singing and modified routines for serving communion. As I have written about before, I can't help but wonder if our current alternative forms of worship are providing a more meaningful worship than these highly modified in-person versions will be able to do.

- As we all know, it is taking a lot of intentional effort to maintain unity of community right now. Some are not able to connect to worship, study and fellowship opportunities they way others are. From my perspective, our churches have been very attentive to this reality. As we return to in-person worship, I believe our unity of community issues will become more complex rather than less. Because of people's personal health risks, we will have some worshipping in person, some likely by technology, and some who are not able to connect in either method. I have no doubt that our congregations will be able to find ways to keep all three groups connected with one another. But it will take time and planning. My concern, is that if we resume in-person worship before we've done such planning, we risk leaving some in our communities feeling isolate and deserted.
- Finally, I am concerned for the health of our pastors and church musicians. I well know that a significant number of both in our churches fall in to high-risk populations. As a Type-2 diabetic, I do as well. Never before have I known that to limit what I do in ministry, but now, I'll admit, it has me being far more cautious. I was quite touched to hear a story this past week of a Jewish congregation in Concord who told their Rabbi who has a compromised immune system from medical treatments that they would not discuss resuming in-person worship until it was safe for her to do so. We cannot afford to ignore the health risks to our pastors and musicians in our discernment regarding resuming in-person worship. Such conversations need to be had in a respectfully and confidentially manner, but they do need to happen. We have talked a lot about how our discernment in these days must reflect the love and care for everyone in our communities. Our staff are very much among those who need our love and care right now.

I expect sometime in the next few week's Governor Sununu's Office will provide guidance for the "reopening" of faith communities. After the opportunity to review the Governor's guidance and consult with our insurance carrier, the Conference will provide some denominational guidelines. With those resources in hand, I expect the leadership of our churches will engage in the faithful discernment of what is the best way forward in

their setting. Until that time, and perhaps even long after it, when folk inquire of you when in-person worship will resume, I invite you to share my phrase. You could even put it on a button if you want. Not yet...and I don't know when.

Blessings during these uncertain days,

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