

Safer Isn't Safe

Coming off vacation on Monday morning and trying to more fully digest Governor Sununu's recommendations for Places of Worship, one phrase keeps echoing in my head as I read – safer isn't safe. If you heard that Governor Sununu is allowing churches to resume in-person worship (at 40% occupancy in a highly modified way), but have not read the entire document, let me be clear that the document says in several ways "Places of worship, it is safer than it was to worship in person, but it is by no means safe."

A few examples of what I mean: First, the Governor has not changed his restrictions on group meeting size, but simply "exempted" churches from it. The exemption itself comes with the clear reminder "this guidance can help mitigate, but not entirely eliminate, risk of COVID-19 transmission". And the first statement in the guidance is "Places of worship are encouraged to continue conducting services online or through means that allow participants to remain in their homes. This is particularly important for people at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19." Safer isn't safe.

Even while the exemption had been granted for churches to meet for in-person worship, there are several modifications that are required (40% maximum occupancy, screening of attendee before they enter the building, built in social distancing of at least six feet, one-way traffic flow in aisles, no physical contact, no sharing of common items such as hymnals, offering plates or communion trays, etc.). The CDC's recommendation for worshiping communities includes use of cloth face coverings. The Governor's exemption also makes it clear that there are things we cannot yet do together as worshiping communities - nursery, childcare, youth education, youth groups and, yes, even coffee hour. It is only when we follow all these guidelines that it is deemed safer than it was before for in-person worship to be held. If we do not diligently follow such guidelines, then it is unsafe.

Singing (choral or congregational) is not mentioned in either the Governor's nor the CDC's latest recommendation. It is clear from the conversations I have been a part of that this is a casualty of politics (separation of church and state issues). The Governor is hoping denominations will set such policies for their churches. Suffice it to say that medical evidence is clear that live singing vastly increases risk factors. At this time, I would discourage any live group or congregational singing as part of in-person worship.

In the "Not Yet" reflection I wrote anticipating Governor Sununu announcement, I shared several reasons why I believe it is too early for us to consider resuming in person worship. My thinking has not changed. In next week's Weekly News, we will provide new recommendations for churches but I can tell you in advance it will include a significant extension of the recommendation for suspension of regular in-person worship activities.

I also know there are some of our churches already discerning a return to in-person worship. To best serve such churches, we will be working on revising our "Things to Be Considered in Resuming In-Person Worship" document over the next week or two to aid you in such discernment. In the meantime, I would urge such churches to consider that no one is saying it is safe to resume in-person worship, only that it is safer. Please take that important distinction seriously in your decision-making.