

Things To Be Considered in Discerning When and How to Resume In-Person Worship: June 2020

Prologue:

Our conversations in our faith communities about resuming in-person worship have to start with one key acknowledgement. Most all epidemiologists agree, because of how we gather and what we do as we gather, worship has been and continues to be one of the riskiest activities in which people can participate during this time of pandemic. There are risk factors that have shifted, some have diminished, but the high-risk nature of gathering for worship has remained constant. We can not begin to do the faithful work of keeping one another safe if we do not start by being honest with ourselves about the risk.

There are communities in New Hampshire where the number of Covid-19 cases have been steadily decreasing and some where there are no active cases. We are at a time when different local health factors, as well as differing congregational sizes, may lead some churches to begin discernment conversations regarding resuming in-person worship sooner than others. This discernment tool is being offered to support our congregations who are preparing to engage in such discernment. We also honor and support the decision making of our congregations that have determined it is not yet an appropriate time for such conversations.

Even as we see some promising signs, the re-opening of businesses and influx of summer tourism both have the potential for increasing the rate of Covid-19 transmission. Flexible, nimble decision making will be a must. Pandemics almost always come with peaks and valleys. What seems safer today, may not seem to be so a month from now. Leadership that adapts to the situation of the moment is going to be the most successful way to keep the members of our congregation safe while maximizing ministerial effectiveness.

This discernment tool is built on the work of many others including the [New Hampshire Governor's Office guidelines for faith communities](#), the [Center for Disease Control recommendations for faith communities](#), the "[As Congregations Consider Re-opening the Buildings for Worship](#)" document provided by the National Setting of the United Church of Christ, and the "[Covid-19 Liability FAQ](#)" produced by the Insurance Board. We would recommend that congregations review all of these as part of their discernment. Further, we continue to recommend following the advice of local health officials. This document will continue to be updated based on new information and learnings.

Decision Making

There is much focus right now on necessary modifications for resuming in-person worship, but how we make timely decisions is equally key to maintaining the health of our worshipping community. Therefore, we recommend the following:

- **Churches consider establishing a Task Force to intentionally engage in processing the significant amount of information necessary for making good decisions regarding Covid-19.** While the work of such a Task Force could be given to a current standing committee, it may also be an ad hoc group. What is important is that decisions are being made in an intentional, coordinated way and be communicated clearly and repetitively. It is also critical that the burden of such decisions not rest on the shoulders of one or two leaders.
- **Decisions about resuming in-person worship needs to factor in the risk to the health of our pastors and church musicians.** A significant amount of our pastors and church musician fall into high-risk demographics. Please do not put your musicians and pastors in positions where they must choose between their job and looking after their own health. That would be a lose-lose situation for both such staff and the churches they serve.
- **Church leaders should have a plan for encouraging compliance with worship modifications.** We are hearing from churches that have already been resuming in-person worship that having everyone in the worshiping community comply with worship modifications is a challenge. Often this is because we tend to behave in an instinctive way in a familiar space, but at times it can also be intentional choice. Having everyone in the community adhere to worship modifications is essential to our commitment to keeping those in our community safe (as well as for liability risk reduction). Leaders need to have a plan for encouraging compliance and a plan for what to do if it proves too challenging for the community to adhere to such modifications.
- **Pastors cannot be the one tasked with overseeing worship modification compliance.** Simply said, a pastor cannot be expected to lead a meaningful worship service and be the one to oversee worship modification compliance at the same time.
- **The spiritual needs of those for whom returning to worship would be high-risk and those who have connected with your church community via your recent on-line offerings will need to be attended to.** Love is going to ask that we encourage those who are in higher-risk demographic to not attend in-person worship. There are also many new connections that have occurred through our churches on-line offerings. Attention needs to be given for how to nurture and support the spiritual needs of both of these parts of our community even as some in your community return to in-person worship.
- **In person worship should be suspended if:**
 - **Someone who has attended your worship service in the past two to three weeks tests positive for Covid-19.** In such cases, in-person worship should be suspended for several weeks to see if others cases arise.
 - **If the number of active cases of Covid-19 in your community increases in any statistically significant way.** In such cases, in-person

worship should be suspended until the numbers are in decline for at least two consecutive weeks.

- **If frustrations with in-person worship modifications prove to be significant enough that alternative worship options seem more meaningful.**

Modifications for Worship

- **We recommend strict adherence to all the guidelines for public worship provided by the New Hampshire Governor's Office.** In conjunction and/or in addition, we recommend the following worship modification be made at this time:
 - Any person displaying Covid-19 symptoms be encourage not to attend in-person worship.
 - Pews be appropriately marked to maintain a minimum of a six-foot distance between family units.
 - Attention be given and clear delineation provided for traffic flow to avoid congestion in doorways, hallways, aisles, or bathrooms.
 - Face makes are required for all attending worship in person
 - All fellowship and worship practices that involve physical touch be discontinued (handshaking, hugs, greeting lines, Passing of the Peace, etc.)
 - Children remain in the pews with their families during Children's Messages.
 - No choral or congregational singing. (Research is showing the face masks do not resolve the risk of singing.)
 - No use of instruments that are played using human breath.
 - No use of commonly touched items (offering plates, communion trays, etc.)
 - Microphones be used/touched by one person only or cleaned between use.
 - Worship items such as bulletins or communion elements be available to be picked up, in a manner that avoids congestions, rather than handed out.
 - Deep cleaning occurs in all publicly used spaces (sanctuary, hallways, bathrooms, etc.) between worship services.
- **All recommendations are minimum modifications.** We encourage churches to make additional modifications based on their unique space and worship practices.
- **Outdoor services may be a helpful way to get your community used to worship modifications in a lower risk environment.**
- **At this time, we would recommend that worship that draws multiple communities of faith together (Installations, Ordinations, Ecumenical or Interfaith Services, etc.) not yet occur in an in-person manner.**

Other Church Activities

- **We recommend that the following church activities not yet occur in an in-person manner: Coffee Hour/Fellowship Time, Church Dinners (not served in a take-out manner), Nursery Care, Sunday School, Youth Groups, Vacation Bible School, or Retreats.**

Duration

It is possible some of the recommended modifications will be adjusted over time. However, it is likely that some will remain in place until such time as there is a widely-distributed vaccine or a successful course of treatment that renders Covid-19 non-lethal.

As always, the Ministerial Staff of the Conference is available to provide clarification or consultation to the leadership of any of our church. May faith and wisdom that is born of Spirit of the Loving God guide your discernment.