

Dear Beloved Community in the Vermont Conference,

I have been struggling to write protocol for when and how and if our churches can open for in person worship. I have received feedback from seven people who volunteered to be readers and commenters. I have paid close attention to my colleagues throughout the country. Out of this, here is what I believe to be most important.

- The Great Commandment calls us to “love our neighbor as ourselves.” Following this commandment, we must weigh each and every decision about re-opening in light of what is the most loving thing we can do given the information we have and the wisdom of the experts.
- Here in the Vermont Conference, more than two thirds of our members are over the age of 60 and many have existing and/or chronic medical conditions. There is growing evidence that those below the age of sixty and in good health can also become sick and die.
- The minimum criteria for considering opening (14 days of declining new infections, testing widely available, hospitals with enough space, staff, PPE and ventilators, the ability and infrastructure to track infections) is not even close to being met.
- Information about COVID-19 is still sparse and changing frequently.

Therefore,

- Our churches need to know and come to terms with the fact that closed buildings and online worship, community and structure are here for the foreseeable future. This is the most loving thing we can do both for our members and our neighbors.
- I suggest that decisions about changing this policy be made quarterly, relying on the facts at that time, to take the anxiety out of living week by week or month by month.
- Every effort should be made to assist those who are struggling with isolation, mental health issues, being safe in their own homes, and financial survival.
- Ministries to and with those who are the most vulnerable in our society need to continue or begin with the best safety measures we can put in place.
- As I read recently, the Church is not closed; it is deployed.

Blessings to each of you, your families and congregations. Know that you are seen and deeply valued. Know that your work is seen and deeply valued. I believe that, relying on the grace of God and knowing our need for one another, we will not only survive but thrive in ways new and old.

Lynn

**P.S.** If you are looking for more detailed information, the protocols from the Wisconsin Council of Churches are lifted up as the “gold standard.” You can find their statement here:

<https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/>

Elsewhere in the Vermont Conference’s COVID-19 page (<http://vtcucc.org/covid-19/>) is information on how to find resources from our state government, the CDC and other official resources.