

Back in May I wrote about COVID and returning to in person worship by saying “not yet.” As we near the end of August it is time to revisit that question.

Some of our churches are doing some form of in person worship. Some are holding services outdoors with social distancing and mask requirements and bring your own seat. Some are offering a phased return to the sanctuary with the following limitations: congregants must maintain at least 6 feet of social distancing and wear masks. Only as many people as will fit complying to these strictures are allowed. There is no in person coffee/fellowship time, no one can use the bathrooms (or some are using strict CDC recommended cleaning before and after each person who uses the bathroom). There is no singing or passing the peace. Congregants bring their own bread and juice for communion. Musical offerings are instrumental and the choir does not sing. One of our churches does have choral singing by using a plexiglass shield or “cage” around the singers and around their pastor.

I do want to say clearly, if your sanctuary is too small for social distancing guidelines and/or it lacks adequate ventilation it is highly inadvisable to return to in person worship.

For churches that are doing some form of online worship, the commitment seems to be to continue even if there is some limited form of in person worship happening as well. I remain concerned about the well being of pastors and congregants who are in that highest risk category. Also, I hope care will be taken for continuing to offer online worship to those who are shut-ins or busy families or who live outside of the area of your church.

The basic guidelines that remain as guideposts for these times are:

- 14 days of falling infection rates using a three day trailing average
- Hospitals not overwhelmed and at or over capacity
- Easy access to testing
- Adequate contact tracing

What about fundraisers that many of our churches count on to make their budget each year. Any fundraisers that bring crowds of people together are extremely risky and in violation of the COVID guidelines from the state. Some of our churches are converting dinners into take home meals. They take orders, package the food and then a masked and gloved person brings the food to a waiting car. This might also work with pie sales or even the transfer of online auction items.

Whatever your decision, please take the time to gather opinions and seek to discern the direction that is right for your congregation. I still believe it is best to err on the side of caution. As we live into a new phase with the opening to partial opening of schools and colleges, we will need to wait to see how or if that affects infection rates in Vermont.

Yes, I am aware of the toll it takes continuing to follow precautions that keep us isolated from one another. We ache to see each other in person instead of on a screen. We want to sing with the gathered community not by ourselves on “mute.” Remember, no matter where you are, no matter how frayed your nerves or deep your depression, gathered or scattered, God is with you. You are not alone. Thanks be to God!

In peace,
Lynn