

Guidelines for FPC gatherings during the pandemic

Dear friends,

On **Thursday, March 12, 2020**, as the COVID-19 pandemic worsened in our area, you voted via email (confirmed in person on March 23) to cease in-person worship. At that time, I had already asked the staff to begin working from home if possible. On **Sunday, March 15**, John Weicher, Kathy Parkins, Susan Dunlap, and I met in the sanctuary to lead our first live-stream worship, keeping appropriate social distancing. This service was made possible with help from Jody Maxwell, John Weicher, and John Fricks.

On Sunday, March 22, we again met in the sanctuary to record. That would be the last time we gathered in the sanctuary, as we determined the risks of meeting in person were too many. For the next several Sundays, I led worship from my home on my own. After Easter, however, Jody Maxwell helped us increase our technical abilities using Zoom-to-YouTube and an OSB platform. This allowed us to add other worship leaders as well as pre-recorded music.

During this time, we continued to gather in the following ways:

The Session and the Diaconate, as well as Service and Mission, Property, Personnel, Christian Education, Finance, Stewardship, Nominating and APNC committees, all met (and continue to meet) via Zoom.

Sunday School classes of all ages quickly found ways and times to meet.

Bob Pleasants (Deacon), Deborah Momsen-Hudson, Susan Dunlap, and I developed a database phone tree and recruited callers to make calls to church members.

Facebook Live vesper services are led twice a week by members and staff.

The following meet regularly over Zoom:

Book studies

Middle and high school youth

Weekly fellowship gatherings

Staff meetings and worship planning

Presbytery committees, local clergy groups, and Durham CAN meetings

The church has continued to be the church as we have stayed connected by phone, email, letters, cards, live worship, and Zoom meetings. You have continued to give to the church so that we might maintain our ongoing ministries and staffing. You have volunteers to make and/or deliver meals. You have found ways to care for those in the greatest need. We continue to be the community of faith, gathered in spirit, if not in person.

On Friday, May 15, Mayor Steve Schewel and Commissioner Wendy Jacobs affirmed the worship guidelines set by our governor on May 8: no more than 10 people are allowed to gather

inside and gatherings can happen outside with social distancing rules in place. Since that time, a federal judge blocked these restrictions on faith communities, allowing gatherings of any size to happen in any way. Before that happened, Mayor Schewel and Commissioner Jacobs had already convened a clergy roundtable to discuss the many issues surrounding the ways our churches return to worship and the timing of such returns. I was asked to serve on this roundtable, and we had our first weekly meeting last week, May 13, 2020. We all agree that it would be dangerous to our community for our churches to rush to begin gathering for indoor worship again.

Based on the changes in state gathering guidelines, FPC needs to formulate its own. We begin by sharing what we know about COVID-19.

HOW COVID-19 SPREADS

- The best way to prevent illness is to avoid exposure.
- The virus is thought to spread mainly between persons who are in close proximity to one another (within about 6 feet) for more than 10 minutes.
- COVID-19 can be spread by people who are not symptomatic.
- Masks reduce the likelihood that the virus spreads.
- Respiratory droplets are produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks. Droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or be inhaled into the lungs.¹

Who/what we must consider:

- Our most vulnerable populations
- The risk involved in each type of in-person gathering
- The experience of other churches who have experienced outbreaks of COVID-19 (see link below)
- The risks of singing (see [link](#))
- The physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental health of individuals as well as the community overall
- The amount of work involved to make gatherings happen safely
- How enforcement of rules and guidelines would be achieved
- Political arguments inaccurately framing religious expression and prevention of COVID-19 transmission as mutually exclusive

Therefore, the Session of FPC approved the following at its meeting on May 18, 2020:

Guidelines for gatherings:

- 1) Sunday worship will be live-streamed to our YouTube channel. For the safety of all involved, we will not meet in person for Sunday worship at this time.
- 2) Meetings will take place via Zoom, or a similar platform.
- 3) Staff will continue to work at home as much as possible.

¹ <https://www.insuranceboard.org/reopening-your-church-office/>

- 4) FPC in-person gatherings will happen outside only. These gatherings will be limited to small-group gatherings and should only take place if necessary, for the mental and spiritual health of the group. Should an in-person gathering take place, the following precautions should be taken:
 - a. Masks covering the nose and mouth are required to be worn by adults and children at all times. Exceptions: infants and others who request exceptions for medical/physical reason.
 - b. No singing will be allowed.
 - c. No food or drink will be shared.
 - d. Public bathrooms will not be available.
 - e. No sharing bulletins/documents/offering plates, etc.
 - f. Extra time for thorough cleaning before and after the event should be allotted for each gathering.
 - g. People experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 will be required to stay at home.
 - h. People who have been exposed to someone with symptoms of COVID-19 or a confirmed COVID-19 case within the last 14 days will be required to stay at home.

Approved guidelines will be **reviewed monthly** by a task force appointed by the Session and recommendations will be made to the Session at each regularly scheduled meeting and at a called meeting, if necessary.

The above guidelines will remain in place until **the end of June** and will be re-evaluated before this timeline expires.

I have shared a draft of this document with our Clerk of Session, Christyn Klinck, with some of our staff, and with some of our medical/planning professionals. I have discussed this plan with the pastors at Westminster Presbyterian, Trinity Avenue Presbyterian, and Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship. I have also discussed plans to care for those in our congregation through this pandemic with the pastors of Pilgrim UCC, Eno River UU Fellowship, Duke Memorial UMC, St. Phillip's and St. Luke's Episcopal, Nehemiah, Monument of Faith, Fisher Memorial, Watts Street Baptist, as well as the Rabbi at Judea Reform. We are committed to staying in conversation as things progress. We want to do this as partners.

I am grateful to be a part of this congregation. I trust God will guide us as we determine the best and safest ways to be the church at this time.

With gratitude for you all,

Mindy