

Dearest Church,

Grace and peace of Christ be with you!

As I preached on Easter Sunday, it sure has been a year. 14 months in fact. One marked with deep challenges, lamentations, unexpected graces, and the resounding affirmations about the importance of community. In the face of pandemics, we've learned how deeply we rely on each other in the life of this congregation, and equally reaffirmed our commitment to love our neighbors as reflections of God.

At our past two monthly meetings, I invited Council to take stock of, assess and discuss together where we are in light of COVID-19. This past year has seen our church take bold and decisive decisions to keep our own community and our neighbors safe from this still persistent pandemic. In concert with our Commonwealth and CDC guidelines, we *closed down* our building to in-person gatherings last March while we *opened up* to new ways to foster, nurture and even grow our community using emerging technologies and nearly constant creativity. I am both proud of and thankful for our congregation's commitments to public health and the greater collective commons – knowing well we've all made sacrifices to this end. Fourteen months in, we are seeing glimmers of hope on the horizon. We give great thanks to God that increasing numbers of people in our Commonwealth and New England are getting vaccinations and barriers to access continue to be overcome. However, as we hear from public health experts, we aren't quite out of the woods yet. And we truly want to do all we can to re-emerge well. So the question I/we hope to touch on in this letter, **what comes next?** When might we begin gathering together face-to-face?

Let me begin by making it clear once again that the ministry of Church of the Covenant **never closed down** in the face of this novel coronavirus. And while isolation has been a challenge, authentic community and fellowship has also continued in critical ways and for this we give God great thanks. As we look to the rest of this spring, summer and fall, our plan is to continue **to remain fully open** to the Spirit's missional invitation. This will include remaining fully open to many forms of worship in our life together, including (but not limited to): intentional pastoral care for one another and our neighbors, twice weekly food justice flowing from our Food Cupboard, the active and increasingly visual congregational ministry spurred by our Climate Jubilee Team, comforting those with concerns, rejoicing with those who have celebrations; and weekly Wednesday evening prayers on Zoom, weekly Bible Study on Zoom, **and** weekly Sunday morning worship on Zoom. We plan to keep holding our weekly services, studies, fellowship and committee meetings on Zoom for the sake of physical health for **all**.

This said, we are well aware of the mental and emotional impact of this continuing dislocation from in person gatherings, and we are very much keeping this in our minds as we phase forward with the rest of society in these coming months. For there is no doubt, we all long for the day we can safely return to regular face to face fellowship, worship and ministry.

One point to make clear – we will make our decisions about how and when to gather in person based on a combination of trusted scientific and public health data, the collective wisdom of sibling communities of faith in and around Boston and beyond, and the Spirit's prompting. I have thus far attended a number of trainings within New England presbyteries and beyond under the topic of "Resources for Regathering", and will continue this work of collaboration and information sharing. As we have heard from trusted epidemiologists, the data we are tracking will be a combination of local, regional, state and national – while always keeping an eye to our global communion in prayerful solidarity. Through attending various webinars and trainings, and in consultation with such guides, we will look most closely at these three metrics:

- Case Rates
- Testing Rates
- Vaccination Rates

The sources for analyzing such data in making decisions include the following (all updated regularly):

- For local, regional, national: Johns Hopkins University and Medicine Coronavirus Resource Center: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/us-map>
- For global trends: <https://epiforecasts.io/covid/posts/global/>
- For Commonwealth of MA: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-updates-and-information>

As we look at these rates, and hopefully see cases decrease, and testing and vaccination rates increase/remain high, we will use such guides as the [Wisconsin Council of Churches “Bearing with One Another in Love”](#) recommendations that provide specific wisdom about how the above metrics are to be applied in the context of church re-gatherings. They for instance recommend a 70-85+% vaccination rate in the counties your church draws from in order to provide the safest environment for regathering for face-to-face church life. More links [here](#) & [here](#).

We also are looking very specifically at the particular strengths and challenges of our building and spaces at 67 Newbury Street. For instance, while we have a wonderfully high vaulted ceiling, we have no windows that open, and no air circulation systems in our sanctuary. We are spending lots of time in staff meetings, worship & music committee meetings, personnel and Council meetings considering factors such as these and how in person gatherings will change the roles of ushers, Sunday staff, weekday staff and volunteers. We have decided all staff will be required to be vaccinated before returning to regular in-building ministry, and have reached out to offer assistance in this process. We also have a task force that has been designated by Council to look specifically at building related policies connected to COVID and cleaning, access, tasks, policies, job descriptions, tenant/ partner relations, and State regulations. Finally, over this past year, I have summoned together a video team that is working hard to gather, install & triage technologies that can aid us in conducting services in the most authentic ways that maintain & build community.

As you can see, there are a lot of moving parts to regathering safely. Given all of the above, and continued hopeful progress with our metrics, we are hoping and praying for a return to some form of regular in-person worship this September. And of course, we will hold lightly to our plans, knowing that the one thing we have learned over this challenging period is that all can change quickly in the world of surging and waning virus/vaccine spreads. For instance, as of me publishing this pastoral letter, the CDC has just said they recommend lifting guidelines on those who have been fully vaccinated in a calculated effort to change the minds of the vaccine-hesitant and anti-vaxxers. City, state and church guidelines however are still critical parts of our own decision-making and we will continue to practice solid communication as a church through our [website](#), emails, [e-newsletters](#) and services as things unfold. And as the metrics morph into specific recommendations and practices for our specific location and community, we will most certainly let you know with future such letters/ communications.

In the meantime, as summer weather unfolds, we will be trying a few creative worship experiences that are safe and allow for some creative regatherings this summer – stay tuned! And don’t hesitate to be in touch.

Finally, while we will continue to proceed with caution while making informed and courageous decisions – we will not be controlled by fear. As [Second Timothy](#) reminds us, God did not give us a spirit of fear, but rather a spirit of power and love and self-discipline. Yes, life can be frightening, and it is ok to be scared by the challenges pandemics pose. However, precisely at times like these we need to live into the repeated refrain from Jesus’ gospel of love, “Do not be afraid” – God will make a way. The very nature of our God Emmanuel is *presence* that comes with it the promise that we are never alone.

So as we emerge from this pandemic, let us do so in tandem with scientific wisdom and the spirit of power and love of Christ. I look forward to the days unfolding ahead. Thank you for being such a beloved part of this community and for all you have done this past year+, and all you continue to do in love and in hope!

In the peace, power and love of Christ,
Rev. Rob in solidarity with your Council