

May 15, 2020

Dear Friends of New Hope,

It's been a long two months. And when it started few of us knew how long we would be sheltering-in-place. For me, the month of April was a time of adjusting to this new reality. I have learned more about social media than I thought I would ever know prior to COVID-19. This all came about so suddenly. Yet, while we knew how difficult it would be to stop in-person worship and pause face-to-face activities, there was also a simplicity to it – the light switch went off the moment we were told to stay home.

Now conversations are swirling about reopening as we live into Phase 1. But this time it's different. Again, the image of a light switch comes to mind, but now it's like a sliding dimmer, figuring out how much to do and what not to do so that no one will be at risk as we shed a little more light into our lives. Phase 1 allows for outdoor worship. Phase 2 will include the provision for indoor worship. There are those who are so eager to be back in worship that they are putting pressure on their leaders to reinstitute regular in-person Sunday morning worship. There are two reasons to refrain from this request. First, the virus is still spreading. Yes, the curve is beginning to flatten, but that is only because people have maintained social distance as well as wearing masks. And second, the governor of North Carolina has ordered that we not return to indoor worship until phase 2, and even then, we are required to limit the capacity for public gatherings.

I know how difficult it is being isolated from one another. There are days when I want to get in the car and go have coffee with a friend. But in order to prevent further spread of the virus when regular activities resume, now is the time for each church session to grapple thoughtfully and prayerfully as we consider next steps.

With that in mind, I urge you to spend the rest of May and the month of June developing a plan for the return to indoor worship. Until an effective vaccine is widely available, all public gatherings will bring a risk. To act too quickly could cause a resurgence or new wave of the pandemic. And now, most recently, we are learning about the life-threatening side-effects from this virus for young children.

As you develop your plans for returning to worship, here are some basic principles as outlined by my colleague Erin Cox-Holmes, Executive Presbyterian of Donegal Presbytery:

1. Honor whatever Phase 1 capacity allows. Strict social-distancing measures must be taken, including keeping people who do not live together at least six feet apart at all times. All participants over the age of two need to wear facemasks (if you have not ordered them for your congregation now is the time to do it). Aggressive new disinfecting, hygiene and other safety protocols will need to be adopted.
2. All vulnerable individuals should continue to shelter in place. Members of households with vulnerable residents should be aware that by returning to public worship environments, they could carry the virus back home. Precautions should be taken to isolate from vulnerable residents. "Vulnerable" as defined by CDC includes:
 - a. Elderly individuals
 - b. Individuals with serious underlying health conditions, including high blood pressure, chronic lung disease, obesity, asthma, and those whose immune system is compromised, such as chemotherapy for cancer, and other conditions requiring such therapy.