

January 2022

The Pastor's Message

Well, here we are again, “meeting” virtually. I didn't think it would come to this. Even though at the beginning of every year I preach a sermon about the uncertainties of life, how, at every New Year, we are “stepping forth into the unknown,” and even though I believe everything I am saying, I didn't think our individual and collective lives the past two years would be *this* unpredictable!

And yet, here we are—enduring the second winter of our discontent. Having to ask those who were present at our Christmas Eve candlelight Service of Lessons & Carols to please refrain from singing these beloved expressions of faith. Once again, I thank you for your patience, for your forbearance. As a nation, a world, and a church, we have not walked this way before. We are trying to find our way. I think we all need to be patient—with ourselves, other people, and life. There is entirely too much free-floating anger out there just waiting to attach to our political leaders, scientists, people who don't share our views on the vaccine, etc. It would be nice if we could recover the kind of feeling we had after the 9/11 attacks—the realization that we are all in this together. Then again, that national crisis demanded nothing of us. This one does.

By the way, I especially want to thank all of you (and there were many of you—both members and friends!) who provided us with feedback regarding the difficult and painful decision to suspend worship. Your response was not only overwhelmingly in support of our decision; it was totally in support. This made our decision a lot easier.

The statistics, the numbers substantiate our decision to temporarily suspend Sunday worship and to postpone the exploration of resuming church meetings, study groups, etc. The number of new COVID-19 cases in Massachusetts has risen from 10,000/day (the day after Christmas, when we made the decision to close) to 22,184 on January 13. We have yet to hit the Omicron peak, though there is evidence that we may be approaching it. From everything I read, it is not unrealistic to hope that the end is in sight. Traces of it in our wastewater are already diminishing. From the experience of South Africa, Great Britain, and, to a lesser extent, several other European countries, when infections from the Omicron variant begin to recede, the number of new cases, hospitalizations, and deaths will decrease relatively quickly.

There are so many ways that we can look at this pandemic, partially because there are so many ways that it is affecting us. In yesterday's paper, we read that UMass Memorial Medical Center, the hospital system that serves our area, has suspended all surgeries and medical procedures for conditions not considered life-threatening. The overload of COVID-19 patients

who need hospitalization, combined with the shortage of staff because of infections or exposures, is so overwhelming that it's forcing hospital administrators to make heartbreaking choices about even some scheduled cancer surgeries, forcing doctors to weigh which tumors tend to grow faster and which, hopefully, will grow slowly enough to justify postponing treatment. Mass General Brigham's chief operating officer said that they are now fielding calls from patients "begging" to be put back on the list for surgery.

As with so many statistics, our focus on the numbers, especially such large numbers, can inure us to how each number represents an individual human life—somebody's parent, sibling, child, or loved one. I can deal with relatively empty grocery shelves, the closing of my favorite Dunkin and Cumberland Farms sites, and even my bank closing its lobby and restricting all business to the drive-through, but I don't know how I would feel if a loved one were not able to receive the medical care that he/she needs because some people refused to act in a socially responsible manner. It bothers me that not all COVID deaths, but many of them, fall into the category of preventable. We can't prevent all deaths, but we need to do what we can to prevent the ones we can. To this end, there is no excuse, not even worship as the gathered church, for turning our church sanctuary or vestry into a super-spreader site.

Throughout this prolonged crisis we will, of course, try to keep in touch with you and help us keep in touch with each other. We need to remember that no matter where we live, we are a part of a special community. We are not alone. I also hope that we take the time to hold each other in our prayers, for some of us are going through a very difficult time.

In a world where you can be anything you want, be kind.

Pastor Paul Sanderson

Monthly Newsletter and Weekly Reflections

A printed and an audio recording of the Pastor's weekly reflection will be posted on our church website. If you would like to receive it by email directly, please let the Pastor know.

The monthly church newsletter will be emailed to everyone on our church contact list.

Celebrations!

The results of our stewardship drive for the coming year are more than encouraging! Last year, when we were unable to meet in person, 11 people/couples pledged their support to the General Fund. The total amount pledged was \$17,098, for an average pledge of \$29.89/week. The remainder of the funds needed to cover our operating expenses came from withdrawals from our invested funds. In addition to the pledges, our new category of supporters, Friends of the

Church, gave us gifts totaling \$6,290, approximately one-third of the amount pledged. One of these gifts was an anonymous gift of \$5,000!

This year, 14 people/couples have already pledged their support to the General Fund. The total amount pledged now stands at \$28,328, for an average pledge of \$38.91/week! This average pledge would be the envy of many churches, at least those with our working-class demographic. The total amount pledged is now back to where it was in 2019 and 2020. I think this is truly cause for celebration! It says a lot about who we are as a church!

We have already received several very generous gifts from Friends of the Church in support of our operating expenses for the current year. Thank you! We are so happy that you are part of our church family!

If you have not already made your 2022 pledge to the church by turning in your pledge card, please do so as soon as possible. We can mail you weekly envelopes for the General Fund, Missions, and Special Offerings if you wish.

Until we resume meeting in person (and even after that for Friends of the Church who live far away), we ask that you please mail your General Fund pledge or special gifts to our Collector:

Jim Holmes -- 245 Flanders Road, Westboro, MA 01581

and that you send your mission offering, your support of our monthly mission outreach, to the Mission Treasurer:

Beverly Lees – 37 Robin Road, Westboro, MA 01681

Thank You To:

The Sanctuary Decorators for Advent & Christmas: Rick Belejack, Bill Guenon, Karin Farmer, Cathy Ambler, Sandy McKeen, Darlene Sanderson, Dianne Simmons, Paul Sanderson.

Rick Belejack & Alan Towne for the gift of the lighted Christmas tree that graced our choir loft.

The Lighters of the Advent Candle during Advent & Christmas Eve: Jim & Cheryl Holmes, Dave & Barbara Crane, Rick Belejack & Alan Towne, Dianne Simmons & Darlene Sanderson, Beverly Lees & Zachary Webster.

The Readers at our Christmas Eve Service of Lessons and Carols: Bob Farmer, Darlene Sanderson, Joyce Harrington, Bill Guenon, Cathy Ambler, Lou Dundin.

Bob L'Heureux—for preparation of all the special bulletins during Advent & Christmas Eve

Sandy McKeen—for ordering and obtaining the poinsettias for our sanctuary during Advent.

Michael Larson and Jim Duncan for providing us with such excellent music during this special season.

Concerns:

Out of concern for privacy and confidentiality, in our church newsletter we do not include the total name of anyone who is struggling with medical or personal issues, even if their name is mentioned in church or appears in our Sunday bulletin prayer list. Since the newsletter is sent out by email, it can be accessed by anyone.

However, we ask that you especially hold Emily (who is struggling with terminal cancer), Emily's parents (who are having a difficult time dealing with her imminent death), Martha (who has been relocated from her home to an assisted living facility), Jay (who is recovering from recent colorectal surgery), Alan (who is recovering from extensive melanoma surgery), Chelsea (who lost a child at eight months of age and recently, unexpectedly, lost her husband), and Linda (who is facing hip replacement surgery—hopefully in February) in your prayers.

Guidelines for Resuming Worship, Meetings, Study Groups, & Other Church Activities

We are anticipating that we will not be meeting for the remainder of January and February. As we near the end of February, I will solicit input from the members of the Diaconate (who are responsible for worship), the Deacon Emeritus, the officers of the church (Treasurer, Collector, Moderator), our church organist(s), and the chairs of the other standing boards and committees (Trustees, Stewardship and Women's Fellowship). We will make our decisions by consensus, keeping in mind that not everyone may agree with our decisions, and that some, for example, may not feel safe participating in gatherings even when most of us believe it is relatively safe to resume them. Please rest assured that if you are one of these people, your feelings and concerns will be taken very seriously.

Throughout this pandemic, we have made a commitment to act out of an abundance of care, concern, and caution for our members and their families. We have tried to set general guidelines for worship and our overall church life while, at the same time, respecting those who are not comfortable or happy with the guidelines.

Basically, we are trying to determine whether we think we need to retain or whether we feel comfortable removing present restrictions on parts of worship and church life.

General Areas of Church Life

1. Sunday worship--in-person?
2. Entry doors—only the front door? Any door?
3. Rope off every other pew for social distancing?
4. Communion—what form? What modifications?

5. Masks—required? Recommended?
6. Congregational singing of hymns, responsive readings, etc.?
7. Socializing preceding and following worship—inside? Outside? Not at all?
8. Coffee hour—resume? Hold outside by kitchen door when weather permits?
9. Offering—offering plate at the back of the sanctuary by the door? Return to part of worship service?
10. Choir—resume? Introit/anthem? Rehearsals?
11. Passing of the peace—resume?
12. Board and committee meetings—resume? In person? By Zoom?
13. Tuesday afternoon study group—resume? In person? By Zoom?
14. Sunday morning Bible study—resume? In person? By Zoom?
15. Pastor resume calling to hospitalized and shut-ins?
16. Church suppers?
17. D&D Dinners?
18. Church fund-raisers?
19. Memorial Services—in the sanctuary? Graveside?
20. Collations following a memorial service?
21. Baptisms?
22. Weddings?
23. Annual Meeting?

Please let me know if there is anything else that should be added to this list—and any suggestions you might have regarding any of them.

*Sometimes I go about in pity for myself,
And all the while
A great wind is bearing me across the sky.
(Ojibwa saying)*