

Greetings!

I, like all of us, have been watching “the numbers” over this past month and a half. They presently are, in a word, encouraging. In a nutshell:

January 5, 2022      30,805 new cases in Massachusetts  
18,218 seven-day average

February 9, 2022    2,128 new cases in Massachusetts  
3,573 seven-day average

Quite unlike the situation that provoked our decision in late December to temporarily suspend worship (and continue to refrain from other gatherings, such as church meetings or study groups), these numbers are trending in the right direction. Unless something unforeseen happens, the scientists anticipate this downward trend will continue.

I still believe we made the correct move when we did. However, we are now in a very different place.

Rather than engage in a debate about where we should set the bar, i.e., the exact number of cases/new cases/seven-day average, etc. that we need to reach to reopen, I would like to make a proposal that is based on the way that the numbers are trending. Please, everyone, let me know asap where you stand on this and why. Just as we would if we were meeting as a Church Council, we will make our decision based on the majority. However, if there are a significant number of church members who would still not feel comfortable resuming worship, and who would like us to wait for just one more month, I will bring this information back to all of you for your consideration.

**I propose that we reopen our church for Sunday morning worship on Sunday, March 6.** This is the first Sunday following Ash Wednesday (March 2), and the first Sunday in Lent. I think it would be especially meaningful to resume our worship as the gathered church on a communion Sunday. This would give us enough time to take down the Christmas decorations, put up the Lenten decorations, and let everyone know we are reopening.

I would suggest that if/when we reopen, we continue to observe the following safety guidelines:

1. All persons attending must wear masks for the entire worship service
2. We should “socially distance” by
  - a. Roping off every other pew
  - b. Keeping family units at least 6’ apart in each pew
  - c. Refraining from gathering in close-proximity conversation before and after the worship service.

I would be comfortable with resuming the following parts of our worship service:

1. Singing hymns, the Gloria Patri, and the Doxology (when we resume passing the offering plates)
2. Participating in Responsive Readings, etc.
3. Having lay leaders/readers
4. Passing the offering plates to each other during the worship service
5. Resuming our traditional form of communion

I would prefer that we wait just one more month to resume church meetings. Unless the numbers continue to drop precipitously, I would prefer we wait a little longer to resume our Tuesday afternoon study group, and Sunday morning Bible study. If things continue to trend the way they are, when we begin to meet as a Church Council, we could set a new date for our annual meeting. To this end, we could begin to think about pulling together the annual reports for 2021. I don’t know how you feel, but I believe we could think about having our choir back in the choir loft—perhaps for Palm Sunday and Easter?

I would feel comfortable holding memorial services, when needed, in our sanctuary beginning March 6.

I will be attending a United Parishes of Southborough Lay Council meeting this coming Tuesday (I will be participating by Zoom). I would like to propose at the meeting that we resume our Easter Sunrise Service (April 17) by the lake in Hopkinton, and, to this end, I would be willing to be the preacher at this service. In addition to being a little premature to hold large gatherings in the beginning of March, I believe it is too late for the United Parishes to plan a

Lenten series, though I would like very much to resume this series in the future.

Governor Baker announced today that as of February 28, the mask mandate for the public schools in the State of Massachusetts will be removed. Of course, individual school systems, depending on what is happening within their area, are free to require them of their students and staff. I think the date that Governor Baker and several other New England governors have set would align well with our own careful reopening on March 6.

The CDC warns us not to be stupid in a rush to normalcy (actually, they didn't use the word "stupid," though it may apply). We should continue to be careful, to be mindful. If the numbers in Massachusetts or our area change significantly in the next few weeks, we will, of course, take that into consideration.

Please let me (and everybody on this contact list) know your feelings about this proposal by checking "Reply All" and getting back to us as soon as possible.

Faithfully yours,  
Pastor Paul