

APPROACHING THE NEW NORMAL: OUTDOOR WORSHIP DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The Diaconate is called to oversee and nurture the spiritual life of the congregation of First Church of Christ, Congregational, United Church of Christ in North Conway, New Hampshire. As a body, in consultation with the outgoing Interim Pastor, Rev. Dr. Ruth Shaver, the incoming settled Pastor and Teacher, Rev. John Hogue, and Licensed Minister Gerry Tilton, the Diaconate has discerned that there is enough available knowledge about SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes the disease called COVID-19, and mitigating the spread of the virus, to cautiously resume in-person worship outdoors this summer. We have also consulted with staff at Memorial Hospital to assure that our regional medical facility was aware of our plans and to solicit any additional precautionary advice. Our plans fall within the state and federal guidelines for gatherings generally but also specifically the guidelines for communities of faith.

First, we want to acknowledge that not everyone is going to feel comfortable gathering with larger groups of people. We expect each person and family to make the decision that best meets their needs for safety and comfort and also know that this may be a week-to-week decision based on varying factors. If you're not feeling well, for instance, that is a very good reason not to join us and in fact, we ask that you not in that instance. Rest assured that recordings of any in-person worship service that is held will be made available on the church's YouTube Channel, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4xGhkZ9fG6YvNtYZMf5VmQ>, as soon after worship ends as possible on Sunday mornings. This practice will continue until such time as live-streaming and subsequent on-demand viewing is possible, whether in-person services are outdoors or indoors.

Second, we want to state up front that the decision whether to hold worship in person will be made weekly based on two factors: 1) changes or lack thereof in the active case count in the communities of Conway, Bartlett, Jackson, Madison, Freedom, Chatham, and Albany, New Hampshire, and in Fryeburg, Maine; and 2) on the weather forecast for Saturday noon through Sunday noon. A decision will be made not later than Friday at noon for each week based on these factors. Note that even an excellent weather forecast will not override the need to hold worship virtually should there be a rise in case counts. In the event that worship cannot be held in person, a service will be available on YouTube beginning at 10:00 Sunday morning.

We strongly encourage everyone to RSVP for the July services by completing this form: <https://forms.gle/9hia4H2ZbDsHC7Gs6>. It will be helpful to know both who plans to attend and who is not comfortable doing so; we will not hold you to either choice because we know that the decision to attend or not could be a last minute one for any number of reasons. (A new form will be created for August services and the link will be shared at a later date.)

We will gently but firmly enforce the following guidelines for the health and safety of all who join us in person:

1. Everyone in attendance must wear a mask at all times. Worship leaders may remove masks when speaking to the congregation for the sake of clear communications (e.g., lip reading)
2. Each individual or group of attendees sharing a house or in a joint "quarantine bubble" will be expected to sit at least 6 feet away from all other groups or individuals. Ushers will be prepared to assist with this
3. Please refrain from shaking hands, hugging, or standing within 6 feet with others for conversation. Physical distance is for everyone's safety
4. The tent, which will be open on all four sides for proper air flow, has limited properly distanced seating space. We will provide a limited number of chairs for use by attendees. For these reasons, attendees are encouraged to bring their own chairs, blankets, and shade (canopies or umbrellas) for sitting in the yard or to stay in their cars with windows down for the service

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5. Attendees are urged to bring cool beverages such as water, juice, or soda to avoid dehydration
6. We urge all who plan to attend to use the restroom at home before you come; the church restroom in the kitchen will be available should you need it but you will be asked to wipe or spray surfaces after you use it and expected to both sanitize and wash your hands before you return to worship, for your safety and the safety of others
7. Ushers and members of the Diaconate will assist everyone to leave in a properly distanced way at the end of the service

What to expect for the service:

- A. Bulletins will include the Scripture readings and prayers; each week's will be available on the church's website to download and print and we will have copies available when you arrive
- B. There will be music but no singing. Though it is safer to sing outdoors, it is not safe; therefore, the Diaconate felt that we should not do so. Weekly preludes and postludes will be prerecorded by Floyd Corson; music within the service will include selections from a library of offerings assembled by the choir and other musicians associated with the congregation
- C. You are welcome to move to the music in lieu of singing; if you get up to dance, please be aware of distancing—but dance if the Spirit moves you!
- D. There will be no unison reading or speaking except for The Lord's Prayer
- E. The Time for Young Disciples will not include asking children to gather at the front
- F. The offering will be received in a basket as you enter or leave the worship area rather than by passing plates or baskets through the gathering
- G. Joys and Concerns will be offered silently except those that are shared with Gerry Tilton before Sunday morning for her to announce
- H. Worship leaders will stand at a distance to greet attendees before and after worship

Much of what is being asked now will help to shape future decisions about worship indoors until such time as there is a solution that significantly reduces the amount of severe disease and death. We do not take lightly either the responsibility as Pastors and Deacons to provide spiritual nurture and care or the essential call as Christians to love and care for our neighbors as we love and care for ourselves. At this time, we feel that we can balance both of these in a way that moves us toward a new sense of community in this strange time.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to call or e-mail any member of the Diaconate or the pastors. And once again, please know that we respect the decision-making process each of you will need to go through to determine your comfort with this opportunity. We know it is not easy because we have done it ourselves. You are in our prayers as we pray that we are in yours.

Ken Schiller, chair; Lee Coffield, Linda Derse, Helen Goss, Julie James, Muriel Magg, and Bob Porter, Deacons; Rev. Dr. Ruth Shaver, Interim Pastor; Gerry Tilton, Licensed Minister; Rev. John Hogue, called Pastor and Teacher

