

Should Churches Return to Worship in Their Sanctuaries?

A Pastoral letter from the Leadership of the Wider United Church of Christ

As the country debates how, when, and under what circumstances life might return to normal, leaders in every setting of the church are deliberating about returning to their sanctuaries for worship.

As leaders in the United Church of Christ, we want to send a clear and strong message to congregations who are considering going back to meeting in person: We urge you to wait until ALL safety concerns have been addressed. We want to offer what guidance we can about issues you should consider in your deliberations.

We are sure that, like us, you have been inundated with materials about the COVID-19 virus. Some of it seems to be contradictory at times. Much of it is being and has been politicized. Discerning fact from fiction can be tricky. We would like to share with you the resources that we have found helpful in our own deliberations, as well as any wisdom we have that could be useful to you.

Among the most impactful articles we have seen is “The Risks—Know Them—Avoid Them,” by Erin Bromage. The article talks in great detail about how the virus is spread and mentions in particular how church life which we experience as normal could prove to be a threat to our worshipers. We strongly encourage you to read this as a part of your decision-making process.

Of all the things we could say, we lead with this principle: Please make every decision based on how it will affect the most vulnerable among you. Many of us will be able to attend services and activities as fully healthy, low-risk individuals. Others, though, will come out of a deep love for and obligation to their church, deciding to take a risk in order to be back with their church family. We urge you to keep that in mind as you process your decisions.

Conference leaders have sent guidance to their churches about the process of deciding how and when to return. We, as national and regional leaders are encouraging churches to consult their Conference website for materials relevant to their setting for ministry.

In a recent email, the Rev. Nigel Uden, Moderator of the United Reformed Church (United Kingdom), offered his prayerful support. In it, he wrote about a deacon of the church in Coventry. That deacon was trying to persuade a young pastor to serve that church in the decade that followed not only the Second World War, but the utter annihilation of the city of Coventry at the hands of the Germans. Their precious church was laid bare. What the deacon said to the young pastor convinced him to come and serve: "There is nothing in this church that cannot be changed as long as the Gospel is preached and the Kingdom of God extended."

Those words have proven to be quite precious and prescient. They have reminded us that when the world forces change upon us, and with it the tremendous burden of grief and loss, our task remains but this: preach the Gospel and extend the Kingdom. No matter what we decide in the coming days, even if it means sheltering in place a while longer, the gospel will be preached and the realm of God will grow through our efforts.

In the words of Julian of Norwich, written from her cell at the church in Norwich that was built as her own shelter in the time of the Plague: "All shall be well. And all shall be well. And all manner of thing shall be well."

Faithfully,

The Council of Conference Ministers United Church of Christ

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