

# **First Parish Church of Stow and Acton**

## **Returning to Church Options**

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in consultation with the FPC Stow & Acton staff

### **First Questions Before Choosing a Path**

There are many businesses that will feel pressured to return to business-as-usual early on in the opening up of society. At FPC we have the good fortune to not be in the category of needing to open our doors in order to continue with our core operations. We've been successfully holding worship, religious education, committee meetings, small groups, and entertainment online. Before long we will also have had our first annual meeting and major fundraiser online. While there are good reasons to return, particularly financial, we can afford to proceed with caution. Overall, we're well-advised to be one of the last organizations in our area, not the first, to return to our building and previous mode of operations. As we consider things, we need to keep our UU values, our interconnected community, and our spiritual needs in the forefront, and not let our decision be dictated by a societal model that is driven by the needs of capitalism rather than our covenantal needs.

We have before us several options. Those include the option to wait for our return to our building completely until there is a vaccine, to begin a phased approach to our return as soon as the state lifts restrictions, and a myriad of options in between. My assumptions here are that any model we follow in our returning to our building will continue to have online offerings in parallel for as long as vulnerable members are still needing to shelter in place.

There are many questions we can ask about this, generally. What is best for our people? What is safest? What puts us in the best financial position? What will keep us in step with the society around us? In addition to these questions, however, some questions about our particular church and the community we serve, and how this decision will impact them should be deeply considered:

- Given that a large part of our church population or their households is in a high-risk group, is returning before a vaccine even practical?

- Is a large enough part of our leadership or their households, including minister, staff, board, and key volunteers, in a high-risk group, thus making this difficult or even impossible to implement?
- Is creating a two-tier system, where some folks are returning, and a large group are not the best way to serve our community? Consider how controversial having two services continues to be -- are we setting up a two services model that feels biased and unjust as well?
- Is creating a two-tier system where each part of the church life is happening both in-person and online such a drain on volunteer energy and resources that it decreases our effectiveness?
- With half of our church doing church online, and half in person, how do we make these groups feel equal? How do we keep them united?
- Does any return plan put pressure on minister, staff, and volunteers in key positions to return before it would be advisable? Does it pressure people to hide medical concerns or to ignore them?

This document will discuss two possible courses of action, waiting until there is a vaccine for the return to the building, and a cautious phased approach to an earlier return, and outline the steps of what the second could look like. Spending the time to outline the second, however, is not to advocate that this is the course we should take. Rather, it is entirely possible that the complexity and limitations of this approach will lead us to choose to remain online-only longer. One important consideration if we do choose to slowly return to our building before a vaccine is available, is are we able to maintain the same quality of services for both online and in person offerings.

## **Resources Consulted**

The following resources helped inform these options. Those who are part of the decision-making process around returning to church are encouraged to read these sources to help inform this decision. In particular, the details of the phases of the return option are drawn from the Wisconsin Council of Churches document.

- "20 Questions Your Church Should Answer Before People Return," Ken Braddy: <https://kenbraddy.com/2020/04/18/20-questions-your-church-should-answer-before-people-return/>
- Interim Guidance for Communities of Faith (draft), CDC: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/context/white-house-is-reviewing-detailed->

[guidance-for-gradual-reopening/f263df1b-f48c-4ede-affa-76803d94ff2f/?itid=lk](https://www.wisconsin.gov/guidance-for-gradual-reopening/f263df1b-f48c-4ede-affa-76803d94ff2f/?itid=lk) inline manual 20

- “Returning to Church,” Wisconsin Council of Churches: <https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/>
- “NATS Panel of Experts Lays Out Sobering Future for Singers: ‘No Vaccine, No Safe Public Singing,’” The Middleclass Artist: <https://www.middleclassartist.com/post/nats-panel-of-experts-lays-out-sobering-future-for-singers-no-vaccine-no-safe-public-singing?fbclid=IwAR27r03bsmcC163JOdJBNx1cs8Ec0LKJtFHY8KZQOA4ia7BO MYkTITVuGmw>

Additional resources consulted, and worth reading before making this decision, include:

- “When Is It Safe to Ease Social Distancing,” National Public Radio: <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/04/25/844088634/when-is-it-safe-to-ease-social-distancing-heres-what-one-model-says-for-each-sta>“
- Opening Up America,” White House: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/>
- “Badger Bounce Back,” State of Wisconsin: [https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/WIGOV/2020/04/20/file\\_attachments/1431309/EMO31-BadgerBounceBack.pdf](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/WIGOV/2020/04/20/file_attachments/1431309/EMO31-BadgerBounceBack.pdf)
- “Guidelines for Reopening Your Church Building,” Georgia Baptist Mission Board: <https://gabaptist.org/reopening-your-church-building/>
- “We Still Don’t Know How the Coronavirus Is Killing Us,” New York Magazine: <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/04/we-still-dont-know-how-the-coronavirus-is-killing-us.html?fbclid=IwAR0vnKzOLbIsPBryb4BD9KUJI3FTLZKwIYfZ6HIQhFUopM4QGT4aT75 tDU>
- “COVID-19 Outbreak Associated with Air Conditioning in Restaurant, Guangzhou, China, 2020,” CDC: <https://www.sciencenewsforstudents.org/article/coronavirus-covid-19-6-feet-social-distancing-not-always-enough>
- “Six Foot Distancing Will Not Always Be Enough for COVID-19,” Science News for Students: [https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/7/20-0764\\_article?fbclid=IwAR1c9M04ItWKfKOFHPezqXGlo3Uu44UsCqgGrZiYkaf 5B6XyKPjlfyl2ys](https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/7/20-0764_article?fbclid=IwAR1c9M04ItWKfKOFHPezqXGlo3Uu44UsCqgGrZiYkaf 5B6XyKPjlfyl2ys)

## The Waiting Until a Vaccine (or Herd Immunity) Option

Some UU churches are declaring that they will not return to full operations in their building until a vaccine is available. Given the health concerns, ethical concerns, and the great number of unknowns in this situation, this is a viable option for FPC, and should be heavily considered. Some arguments particular to our church in favor of waiting for a vaccine or at least until there is herd immunity include:

- **Attendance has been higher**, and steady, since moving to online worship. The hurdles that were there for people to attend worship have mostly been conquered. Those who are still having trouble connecting are being worked with to see what options can work for them.
- **Two-tiered worship, two-tiered church:** The type of community we've been able to create through online worship would be impossible to do with both in-person and online worship. Worship that is in-person and online usually becomes a broadcast worship for online viewers, where it is watching only, less participatory, and less engaged. Creating engaged communal worship where those who are in-person and those who are at home are both feeling connected to each other and having a similar worship experience is extremely difficult. This same factor can apply to many areas of church life. In going back before a vaccine, we might be creating a two-tiered church where our most vulnerable members are shut out from areas of church life, or feeling like second-class citizens where the offerings are somewhat adapted for them, but not geared towards online participation.
- **Online Worship vs. Social Distancing Worship:** The precautions we would need to take to worship together before a vaccine include wearing face masks, removing hymnals, foregoing greeters, and, worst of all, probably avoiding all singing. Many folks will probably believe that online worship is a better worship experience than in-person worship without in-person singing and with the other limitations. Even just seeing everybody on screen might be a better community-building feeling than seeing only 50 people spread out in the sanctuary in person with a six-foot distance between family groups. And some phases of the returning plan call for no coffee hour gathering at all. Some of our members have found they actually prefer online coffee hour to our in-person ones.
- **Church is an "optional" gathering for many people.** We are more analogous to attending the theater than to going grocery shopping. Our members will return to public life one step at a time, and church may be a logical last step for them, as they can avoid it.

- **The interconnected nature of our church community** makes us a place that brings people into contact with people across generations, across multiple geographic communities, and across walks of life. And as our groups are all interconnected, this makes the virus easy to spread among us, even if we're taking precautions.
- **We serve a population that is particularly at risk.** Our congregation, like most UU congregations, has a high percentage of people over 60, and we have numerous people with other at-risk categories. This means we should be one of the organizations that is last in society to return to operating at our physical location. Returning to our building in phases could put pressure on people to disclose sensitive medication information or return to staff and volunteer roles before it would be advisable for them to do so.
- **Our campus is large,** and cleaning it as frequently and thoroughly as we would need to would be a complex and difficult operation. This is made more complex by the transition in our sexton position.

All these factors, and more, make a strong case for continuing with virtual church until a vaccine is found, or at least until herd immunity seems to have been achieved and the rate of virus transmission has become extremely small to non-existent in our state.

## **The Phased Returning to Church Option**

The White House criteria for moving into Phase One are:

- Downward trajectory of documented COVID-19 cases reported or positive tests as a percentage of total tests within a 14-day period.
- Hospitals able to treat all patients without crisis and no PPE shortages.
- Needed supplies, from hand sanitizer to toilet paper, are readily available.

A recent NPR article suggests the criteria for moving into Phase One is when infections are down to one per million people in the state. Their model suggests that Massachusetts will reach this milestone around June 10.

This plan does not intend to prescribe the conditions for the timeline, which should be carefully considered. Rather, it is about the phases we would take after our established criteria are met. In creating criteria, we should move conservatively, moving into Phase One after (1) the White House criteria are met, (2) the State of Massachusetts begins to ease restrictions, and (3) after even higher standards for beginning Phase One, in

keeping with the latest scientific research and expert recommendations are met, such as sustained decrease in cases at both a state and local level. We can set our own higher standards than these before the phases would be embarked upon, and consider the latest emerging wisdom about when the phases should begin. We should also keep in mind UUA recommendations (forthcoming).

In addition, needed supplies for our return, such as hand sanitizer, disinfectant wipes, and toilet paper must be readily available in the stores again before Phase One can be considered. Furthermore, especially given the departure of our current Sexton, a thorough cleaning plan must be in place before any return to the building.

It is a possible option that we can choose to skip the first phase, or even both Phase One and Two, wait longer in our online mode, and then move directly into Phase Three. Indeed, it should be noted that Phase Two -- particularly the worship, coffee hour, and religious education components -- may feel limiting enough in what we are doing in person, combined with the increased complexity of maintaining safety, that it feels easier and more prudent to wait it out until we feel Phase Three could begin, or to implement Phase One and Two for everything but the Sunday experience, and bring those back last along with Phase Three.

***Please note the the following phases, and the verbiage used in many cases are drawn from the Wisconsin Council of Churches document:***

***<https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/>***

## **Phase One**

Phase One will include allowing gatherings of up to 10 people with social distancing requirements and opening up some additional operations with social distancing requirements. Vulnerable people should continue to shelter in place.

### **Recommendations:**

- **Worship:** Church will continue holding online worship services only. Can consider having a team of people producing worship in the sanctuary together, maintaining social distance.
- **Coffee Hour:** Virtual and small-group parking lot social times only.

- **Rites of Passage:** (weddings, funerals) may be held online or in person with less than 10 in attendance.
- **Religious Education:** continues to be offered online only.
  - **Junior and Senior Youth Groups** continue to be offered virtually by the Youth Director.
  - **High School Discussion Group** continues to be offered virtually on Sundays at 11:15.
  - **K-8 RE classes** are offered virtually from 9:15-9:55 (starting in the fall).
- **Small Group Ministries, Adult Programs, Social Events, and Social Justice Task Forces** continue to meet online.
- **Church board, councils, and committees:** may meet in person in groups smaller than 10 wearing masks and maintaining social distancing or may continue to meet online, after assessing their groups' needs.
- **Fundraisers** will be allowed virtually or outdoors only.
- **Office and Building:** Anyone in the building for office work should be wearing a mask; people should log their attendance in the office and sanitize surfaces when working in office space.
- **Renters:** allowed back in building if they are able to observe gathering limits and distancing protocols, and we are able to accommodate the cleaning needs.
- **Pastoral Care Visits:** Pastoral care visits to senior living facilities, hospitals, and high-risk individuals are prohibited.
- **High-risk individuals and their Household Members** (people over 60 and those with underlying conditions), whether minister, staff, or volunteers, should continue to shelter in place.

In short, Phase One is a cautious move back into our building for small teams.

### **Needs of Phase One:**

- Plan for cleaning/sanitizing church frequently.
- Hiring, orienting, and training of a new Sexton, and possibly additional cleaning agency.

## **Phase Two**

Phase Two will begin several weeks after Phase One has been successfully implemented, if the trajectories of the societal trends of the epidemic continue. Phase two will include allowing gatherings of up to 50 people with social distancing requirements and some resuming of other operations with social distancing requirements. Vulnerable people should continue to shelter in place.

## Recommendations:

- **Worship:**
  - In-person worship services indoors or outdoors of under 50 people (with a plan for managing the number of people per service) held in conjunction with online worship.
  - Offer multiple services to allow for social distance.
  - Members asked to wear face masks while at church.
  - **Choir and Music:** No choir or singing of hymns *or any singing* at in-person worship. The Wisconsin Council of Churches document states: *“Singing is among the riskier behaviors when it comes to spreading droplets/aerosols which can carry the virus a significant distance and remain suspended in the air. A cloth mask is unlikely to be enough to protect you or your neighbor. We recommend against singing in the sanctuary when the congregation is gathered.”*<sup>1</sup> See also the NATS Panel article referenced above.
  - A no-touch process for “Greet Your Neighbor”
  - Remove hymnals
  - No paper orders of service provided. Electronic copies and television screen used instead.
  - Offering collected by people placing it in a receptacle as they leave. Volunteers pay particular attention to cleaning hands after dealing with the offering.
  - Distancing: Have people spread out in sanctuary space with one family unit per pew; keep empty pews between families.
- **Coffee Hour:** No coffee hour/virtual only. Continue encouraging people to leave the building rather than mingling. Small groups are allowed to gather with social distancing in parking lot.
- **Rites of Passage** (weddings, funerals, confirmations) can take place staying under the 50 person limit using the same guidelines as worship.

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<sup>1</sup> “Returning to Church,” Wisconsin Council of Churches:  
<https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/>

- **Religious Education**
  - No field trips are held.
  - No snacks unless in individual portions.
  - Strict cleaning protocols are established and observed. All kids and adults wash hands or use hand sanitizer prior to entering RE spaces.
  - **Junior and Senior Youth Groups** meet in-person wearing masks and observing social distancing guidelines. Remove table from youth room to allow for furniture to be spread out for greater social distancing.
  - **High School Discussion Group** continues to be offered virtually on Sundays at a time that allows adults and youth to choose in-person or virtual worship.
  - **K-8 RE classes** are offered virtually at a time that allows adults to choose in-person or virtual worship..
- **Small Group Ministries, Adult Programs, Social Events, and Social Justice Task Forces** may meet in person wearing masks and maintaining social distancing or may continue to meet online, after assessing their groups' needs.
- **Church board, councils, and committees:** may meet in person wearing masks and maintaining social distancing or may continue to meet online, after assessing their groups' needs.
- **Fundraisers** will be allowed inside and in-person under 50 people, and outdoors and online. In-person fundraiser will follow the same masks, social distancing, and no-touch parameters as worship services.
- **Office and Building**
  - Post signs indicating symptoms and urging people to stay home/seek medical attention if they have symptoms.
  - Maintain a good stock of tissue, soap, hand sanitizer and disposable paper towels for drying hands.
  - Clean the building regularly and between user groups, paying extra attention to high-touch surfaces.
  - If you become aware of someone in the church or a building user infected with COVID-19, put your communication plan into action, and cooperate fully with contact tracers.
  - Regular office functions may resume while maintaining social distancing and wearing masks.
- **Renters:** Allow renters to resume operations, with a plan to address cleaning needs and agreement to observe gathering and distancing protocols.
- **Pastoral Care Visits:** Pastoral care visits to senior living facilities, hospitals, and high-risk individuals are prohibited.

- **High-risk individuals and their Household Members** (people over 60 and those with underlying conditions), whether minister, staff, volunteers, or program participants, should continue to shelter in place.

In summary, Phase Two is a hybrid time where both in-person and on-line options are available for most areas of church life.

### **Needs of Phase Two:**

- Plan for limiting number of people at worship to 50.
- Music plan for in-person worship without singing.
- Hiring, orienting, and training of a new Sexton, and possibly additional cleaning agency.
- Plan for cleaning/sanitizing church frequently.
- Removal of hymnals and other objects from areas where people gather
- Technical support (including volunteer videographer) for holding both in-person and online worship,
- A plan for how to do a hybrid or dual online and in-person worship, religious education, and coffee hour.

### **Phase Three**

Phase Three will begin several weeks after Phase Two has been successfully implemented, if the trajectories of the societal trends of the epidemic continue. Phase Three will resume all gatherings, with more minimal protective and preventative measures in place for the general public and more protective measures for vulnerable populations.

### **Recommendations:**

- **Worship:**
  - Continue to offer both in-person and remote/online options.
  - Consider continuing to offer multiple services.

- Continue encouraging masks and social distancing, possibly relaxing pew restrictions.
- **Choir and Music:** Watch for public health recommendations on group singing and individual public singing as we arrive at this phase.
- Continue to use no-touch alternatives for greet your neighbor, order of service, collecting offering, and continue with hymnals removed using electronic alternatives.
- **Coffee Hour:** Continue with no coffee hour. Continue encouraging people to leave the building rather than mingling. Small groups are allowed to gather with social distancing in parking lot.
- **Religious Education** in-person for all ages with masks, social distancing and cleanliness guidelines.
  - No field trips are held.
  - No snacks unless in individual portions.
  - Strict cleaning protocols are established and observed. All kids and adults wash hands or use hand sanitizer prior to entering RE spaces.
  - **Junior and Senior Youth Groups** meet in-person wearing masks and observing social distancing guidelines. Remove table from youth room to allow for furniture to be spread out for greater social distancing.
  - **High School Discussion Group** meets in-person wearing masks and observing social distancing guidelines. Remove table from youth room to allow for furniture to be spread out for greater social distancing.
  - **K-8 RE classes** meet in person wearing masks and observing social distancing guidelines. Classes use different spaces for classes rather than small lower hall classrooms, including mid-section of lower hall, vestry classroom, youth room, and Fellowship Hall.
- **Small Group Ministries, Adult Programs, Social Events, and Social Justice Task Forces** may meet in person, still encouraged to wear masks and keep a social distance, while maintaining some online options for high risk individuals and those who do not feel comfortable being in public.
- **Church board, councils, and committees** may meet in person, still encouraged to wear masks and keep a social distance, while maintaining some online options for high risk individuals and those who do not feel comfortable being in public.
- **Fundraisers** will follow the same masks, social distancing, and no-touch parameters as worship services.
- **Building and Office** can resume as normal, with attention to cleaning.
- **Renters:** Allow renters to resume operations, with a plan to address cleaning needs and agreement to observe gathering and distancing protocols.
- **Pastoral Care Visits:** Pastoral care visits to senior living facilities, hospitals, and high-risk individuals are allowed with diligent hygiene practices.

- **High-risk individuals and their Household Members** (people over 60 and those with underlying conditions), can attend in-person or online activities, based on comfort levels.

In summary, in Phase Three we are back in our building for most church activities, but online offerings are still available for key programs and worship for high-risk individuals. The needs for Phase Three are mostly the same as Phase Two.