

THE PRESBYTERY OF NORTHERN NEW YORK

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A)

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The mission of the Presbytery of Northern New York is to witness, with love, to Jesus Christ in word and deed. The Presbytery is called to inspire and support the growth of leaders and congregations in their ministry and mission for Christ.

March 2, 2021

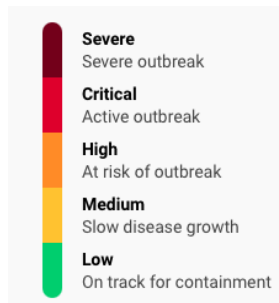
Dear PNNY Friends,

As the one-year anniversary of the COVID-19 Pandemic shut down comes to pass, I wanted to reach out together with the Commission on Ministry to offer some guidance and pledge our continued support as you consider your reopening plans. Some of you reopened with precautions in place, some have operated exclusively on remote worship and some are transitioning to a hybrid [online & in person] model for worship. Wherever you are please know that you are in our prayers and are here to help as together we navigate the difficult public health decisions impacting our worship and community life.

At this momentous juncture we would like to lift up two important points:

[1] We are not “out of the woods” yet. We must remain vigilant and do everything in our power to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Vaccination is a first and important step but it does not prevent you from carrying and spreading the virus. Asymptomatic spread of COVID-19 is real and until scientists study this further, there is still no guaranteed safe way to gather for worship or other activities without significant precautions taken. Social distancing and mask wearing must remain in place. Singing is not safe when people gather in an enclosed space even while masked and socially distanced .

We encourage you to stay up to date using accurate data to inform all decisions. One trusted source that our Stated Clerk Pieter Visscher learned about on a webinar for mid-council leaders. Using several important County-specific data can be accessed by visiting COVID Act Now at the following link. <https://covidactnow.org> For your convenience, I have created below links for each of the five counties that make up our Presbytery.



Currently at Critical/Active Outbreak Level [As of March 2nd]

[St. Lawrence County](#)

[Franklin County](#)

[Clinton County](#)

Currently at High/At risk of Outbreak Level [As of March 2nd]

[Jefferson County](#)

[Essex County](#)

Friends, we are in this for the long haul and I implore you to be slow to relax restrictions and take time to consider all of the data and advice from trusted sources. Speaking of relaxing restrictions, perhaps the best source for church-specific guidance continues to come from the Wisconsin Council of Churches in their recent report entitled, “[Holding Our Plans Loosely: Returning to Church 2.0](#)” An Executive Summary of this detailed report is included with this letter. You may also go you their Coronavirus “returning to church” web resource page by clicking [HERE](#)

Rev. David Bennett
Resource Presbyter

William Young
Treasurer

Pieter Visscher
Stated Clerk

Mary McGreevy
Bookkeeper

[2] There is no returning back to exactly what was. Every church has the opportunity to reinvent themselves in some way, shape or form. God is doing new things in our midst, even as we mourn what was and look to the future God has in store for us. What continues to amaze me in all of this is how adaptable and flexible we have become. Let us not lose this gracious gift we were forced to develop!

Online worship and gatherings are here to stay... and while it has been quite a challenge to set up and implement, God is at work through them. Snowbirds are attending worship with their church family online. Church members are connecting for daily prayer and weekly Bible study online. Those who moved away are able to stay connected to worship with familiar faces. Musicians are sharing their gifts in worship online and churches that share their music are enriching our online worship. Fellowship gatherings for many occasions are happening online. "Zoom Rooms" are becoming "Upper Rooms" making sacred spaces online where God meets us and works in and through us.

During these times of increased isolation, the importance of self care and care for others has increased. If the short term impact is any indication, the need for mental health services and medication has skyrocketed and will remain so for some time. Daily functioning has been a challenge for many and there is no profession or life situation that is untouched by the required public health restrictions. Educators, front line workers, first responders, and those who are deemed "essential" are under incredible stress. I would add Pastors to this list because so much of their work goes unseen and what is seen online requires a wholly different set of skills and abilities. On top of this, there are folks in our pews who do not appreciate these efforts nor understand how close to burn out many pastors are. Church leaders, I ask that you consider how you are caring for yourself and others and reach out for help. Your Resource Presbyterian is available to assist and connect you to resources or simply be a listening ear and compassionate conversation partner for those who need it.

The pandemic has revealed many "hidden" societal injustices that Jesus cared deeply about in his day and calls the church to care about them today. Issues like income inequality, poverty, systemic racism, and the rise of domestic terrorism are not things to sit back and lament quietly as people of faith. Jesus fed the hungry, healed the sick AND stood up to the people and systems that perpetuate the injustices that play a role in creating the problem. COVID-19 has given the church another chance to see the role of service and activism as part of what it means to follow Jesus and build the "kin-dom" of God on earth as it is in heaven. May God use this time to challenge our complacency and grow in us a desire to share God's love and grace in ways that meet immediate needs but also work to change the systems that keep people from becoming all that God created them to be.

We are not "out of the woods" yet, and there is no returning back to exactly what was. These are hard words to write and even harder to receive. Know that your Resource Presbyterian and the Commission on Ministry stand ready to come alongside in assistance. Please do not hesitate to reach out.

May God's Peace and Blessings surround you as we walk this journey together!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "David".

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. **We recommend prioritizing life and health of neighbor in all ministry decisions as a Gospel witness.**
2. Concurrent values include creativity (holy experiments), urgency and care in meeting human needs, and attending to diversity and accessibility.
3. Norms of these recommendations include taking seriously the church's role as community leader, and trusting in the resilience of the church.

4. Churches should take a two-step approach to gathering, tracking the following data:

FIRST, watch vaccination rates. When more than 50% of the population has been vaccinated, we can expect that it will begin to have an impact on viral transmission (although “herd immunity” will not likely be fully reached until vaccination rates exceed 75%).

THEN, track COVID cases per 100,000 population and the rates of positive tests. Our safer threshold for gathering is when cases are less than 5 per 100,000 population and positive tests less than 10%. Safest would be even lower.

UNSAFE TO GATHER	MAKE IT SAFER	SAFEST
Vaccination rates <50%	Vaccination rates 50-70+%	Vaccination rates 70-85+%
Viral Transmission ♦ Cases >10/100K ♦ Positive Tests >10%	Viral Transmission ♦ Cases 5-10/100K ♦ Positive Tests <10%	Viral Transmission ♦ Cases <1/100K ♦ Positive Tests <5%

5. **Some of the most important things churches can be doing until it is safer to gather in person is to encourage people to be vaccinated, debunk myths about vaccinations and vaccines, and encourage continued protective behaviors.**
6. **When you begin gathering in physical space again, plan on event modifications, mitigations and protective behaviors until COVID in the community is very low.** Expect these modifications to continue for a significant amount of time, perhaps this calendar year or longer. See full text of this document for information about phased plans, mitigating especially risky behavior, and healthy decision-making.

UNSAFE	MAKE IT SAFER	SAFEST
All at once Unmasked No distancing Full capacity Assembly singing Eating together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Face masks mandatory ♦ Physical distancing ♦ Low-touch environment ♦ Outdoors or increased air exchange ♦ Shortened time of service ♦ Singing by worship leaders only ♦ Focus on sanitizing high-touch surfaces ♦ Sign-in / attendance list 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ All of the “make it safer” plus no or minimized singing ♦ Hybrid, phased plan ♦ Wait 1 month+ between phases ♦ Fallback plan for outbreaks ♦ Communication plan ♦ Team responsibility