

First Parish Church Protocols for Resuming In-Person Worship

Good News: NH positivity rate is down to 1.6%. There are currently 353 active covid cases. Strafford numbers are not quite as good. Our positivity rate is 2.8% with 25 active cases this week, but we are still below the 3% threshold we have been watching for! We will continue to watch these numbers as they will help us discern when to further relax safety protocols or if we would need to return to all virtual worship.

Assumptions: As we plan to resume in person worship on Sunday, July 11, there are a few assumptions we are making.

1. We will continue to offer an on-line option for those who want to participate remotely.
2. We assume this will be a mixed group of vaccinated and unvaccinated participants. While we believe that most of the congregation is fully vaccinated, we know of a number who are not vaccinated and we know that as of now, children under 12 cannot be vaccinated.
3. The CDC has indicated that those who have been fully vaccinated, the activities of in person worship are reasonably safe. Sadly, for those are not vaccinated, in person worship is still a high-risk activity due to the length of time sitting together in the group and activities like singing that project virus particles through the air. While we will try to provide as safe an environment as possible, we believe that in person worship is not safe for those who have not been vaccinated and encourage them to participate on-line instead.

What to expect in the sanctuary in July:

1. We will be sitting socially distanced.

The pews have been roped off in checkerboard fashion that allows 49 households to sit socially distanced. For those vaccinated, social distancing is not required, but in a mixed group it is still advised by the CDC. We ask the congregation to sit by household. Should we run out of space, fully vaccinated individuals may choose to sit together to make space for others.

2. We will require masks for worship.

Everyone continues to advise this for larger and mixed groups. Worship leaders at a distance from the rest of the congregation may un-mask when they are speaking or singing. Masks will be available in the atrium and narthex for those who come without them.

3. We will not sing congregationally.

The consensus for mixed groups is still to limit music to distanced soloists and small groups, recorded music and congregational interaction with “body percussion” (clapping, snapping, stomping) and use of sign language. Congregational singing can return when the vaccination rates are higher, or

community spread has been eliminated. We recognize that this will be hard for many of us!

4. Communion, Offerings

Although the risk of covid transmission through things we touch is thought to be low, we are still following advice not to pass around things among the congregation. So, there will be a large offering basket at the front of the sanctuary where those who want to can drop offerings.

Discussion is still happening about the best handling for communion, but likely in August, we will offer sealed communion elements on a table to be picked up as people arrive.

5. Pew Registrations: We will use pew registration forms for contact tracing purposes.

6. Dismissal from worship:

Deacons will dismiss worshippers pew by pew and encourage them to exit the building to the outside walkway. We are tentatively planning to offer cold drinks outside in single-use containers in the hopes of drawing people outside for fellowship. We will not be offering our traditional fellowship time inside. Our experience from hybrid funerals is that it is very difficult to get people to leave the sanctuary or atrium when they are excited to see one another and want to talk. Outdoors is safer for such conversations. Our hope is that cold drinks under some pop-ups would draw people outside. As with singing, we will keep an eye on local positivity rates and vaccination rates for signs that we can resume our usual fellowship hour. There will be a laptop set up for hybrid participants to participate in fellowship time with in-person worshippers.

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