

The Reverend's Ruminations - August 2020

Welcome to August! Seasons are one of my favorite things about Minnesota, but when we pause to contemplate the lightning bugs or dip our toes in a local lake these sultry days, the pessimist inside is quick to point out that our Minnesota “summer” is already two-thirds gone and slipping quickly away. Amid the “altered reality” that COVID-19 has enforced, it has been harder to mark the passing of our summer days; fairs, festivals, and camps have been cancelled, family trips postponed, and even summer jobs are different than past years.

Corporate worship services are another way many of us mark the passing of weeks, and those too have been altered since mid-March. I am glad that so many have continued to join our Facebook Live streams on Sunday mornings (or later in the day/week), click on our service videos on the RightNow Media site, or tune in on Fairmont cable access. We do plan to continue (and even improve the quality of) those virtual options well into the future. But of course, the “reopening” of churches has been a frequent topic of discussion among members, fellow ministers, and complete strangers alike: *“Are you guys open? What are you doing at your church? How does worship look now?”* The answers are as varied as the denominational lines that give us all the different churches in our own little area of southern Minnesota.

Over the last month, a small task force put in several hours of work on a safety plan for First Congregational UCC that should allow us to resume in-person worship services in the coming month. The Church Council spent quite a bit of time discussing this plan at our July meeting, and eventually voted to welcome those who feel comfortable back to church beginning August 16. *Like so many activities these days, this is subject to change if things in the world of public health or policy are altered in our state or local area, but we hope to smoothly implement the changes required to once again gather in our beautiful church building.*

As I already warned over the last couple months, this does not mean that we will be throwing open the doors on August 16 to “business as usual” as you may remember a First Congo worship service. Masks will be required, you will be asked to use hand sanitizer upon entering, ushers will be helping ensure physical distancing in the sanctuary, and we will have a sign-in roster to help us contact you in the unfortunate circumstance that an accidental COVID-19 exposure occurs in our building. The full text of the COVID-19 Safety Plan is included in this newsletter, and I implore each of you to review it fully before choosing whether or not to attend in-person.

For the foreseeable future, in-person worship services may feel a bit sterile, but we will do the best we can to make them personable. When last we met, we had already begun to phase out the familiar “sharing of the peace” because of the risk of germs being spread through handshaking. For this same reason, fellowship before or after the service will also be discontinued. Under current guidance, we will not be able to include singing by either the congregation or choir, but we will still try to incorporate piano or organ music to help with the flow and contemplative nature of the service.

To restate another point from my last *Ruminations* article, no matter where or how we “do” worship, it is about just that: **WORSHIP**. When we gather—no matter the format you decide is best for you—it is about worshiping the Creator and Redeemer of all. Our great triune God has never been confined to a particular ark, tent of meeting, or sanctuary—even if we mortal humans may feel a stronger connection to our Maker within the walls of our chosen churches. Fellowship and interaction with other like-minded believers is an important part of what helps form that connection within each of us; but at its core, church is about encountering God, confessing our sins and seeking forgiveness for them, reading and expounding on the words of holy scripture, and lifting our prayers of petition on behalf of family, friends, and the world. Those elements will always be present in worship services of First Congregational United Church of Christ; when it is safe to do so, additional elements like hymns and personal fellowship will once again add joy and splendor to our gatherings.

While we may soon see many of our church family in person, each member should make their attendance decision based on their individual health and safety circumstances. Not everyone has adapted to the restrictions of public life in the same way, so let me continue to encourage you to check in on one another’s spiritual and mental well-being through appropriate telephonic, electronic, or face-to-face means. We’re all in this “new normal” together, and with God’s grace we will continue to grow and mature in our faith!

Yours in Christ,
Rev. Cory Germain