

The Reverend's Ruminations - June 2020

It hardly seems possible, but Minnesota's traditional months of summer are upon us. Without all the spring sports schedules and end-of-school-year activities (sadly, including graduation ceremonies), it really feels difficult to mark the passing of spring into summer. This will definitely be one for the history books—a new defining moment in all our lives. By now, “cabin fever” has started to feel like a permanent condition instead of a temporary ailment cured by the warm sunshine of spring!?!

Of course the thing on many people's minds in the past few days is President Trump's sudden declaration of churches as “essential services”—something for which many groups and individuals have been clamoring for weeks or even months. Some of our brothers and sisters in the Catholic and Lutheran traditions were even threatening to violate Governor Walz's executive order and begin holding in-person worship services this last weekend, before the national guidance changed to allow such.

HOWEVER, let me be clear: this change does NOT mean that we will immediately be returning to “business as usual” at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Fairmont. This will be a very gradual and deliberate transition, guided not by the demands of emotional protesters, but informed by scientifically-backed guidance from medical professionals at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Minnesota Department of Health, as well as evolving guidance from the UCC Minnesota Conference. To quote our Conference Minister, Rev. Shari Prestemon:

“Over the past few weeks, we have proven that we can facilitate rapid change in the Church when it comes to the health and safety of our members and communities! We have created new, virtual forms of worship, provided ongoing care and support for one another, and continued to conduct business and decision-making — and we have done all of it with grace, patience, and a sense of humor! Now we are shifting into yet another season of this pandemic, when once again we as churches must make critical decisions about how we will move forward given evolving information and circumstances.”

Her encouragement, with which I heartily agree, is that we resist any temptation to rush back to in-person activities until we have made every effort to ensure that we can do so safely. We need to remember that the discernment we exercise now can be of enormous importance to the lives of those we hold dearest. The Church Council and I have many things to prayerfully consider before resuming any form of in-person worship, most important among which is: how can we do so in a manner that is safe for the majority of our congregation? In case you've forgotten the “view from the pew” during this extended absence, we're a pretty grey congregation (i.e., over age 60, to be generous with our demographics). Think what you may about the coronavirus, but it will have a say in everything we do for the foreseeable future!

In conversations with friends, family, and fellow pastors, I have repeatedly stated that no matter when or how we resume in-person worship, I think we will continue to make our services available online through RightNow Media and/or Facebook Live. This online presence (in addition to our weekly broadcast on Fairmont's cable access channel) has opened up a much broader audience than we could have imagined. Even before COVID-19, we didn't often see more than 75-85 people in our pews on a Sunday morning except for special events; meanwhile, our Facebook worship services since the pandemic response started have been averaging over 200 views nearly every week! Virtual services certainly do not take the place of the fellowship we experience when gathering together to pray, sing, and worship side-by-side, but offering an alternative to those outside our geographic area or who have no church home is a great mission requiring very little additional labor.

As I have repeatedly encouraged, please continue to keep in touch with one another. You may be getting out in public more than you have in recent weeks, but many are rightfully exercising caution about their public exposure for any number of personal or medical reasons. Human interaction, whether face-to-face, through video technologies, or by phone are important to everyone's mental and spiritual well-being. Be a blessing to one another through the guidance of the Holy Spirit!

Yours in Christ,
Rev. Cory Germain