

Eleven weeks of lockdown. We're tired of this. We are eager to get back to normal. Over the Memorial Day weekend, scenes of crowded beaches, barbecues and pool parties made it clear that many Americans are weary of wearing masks and fed up with social distancing

But the pandemic didn't end just because we got bored of it. As John Adams said, "*Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.*"

Consider the facts. In a mere 11 weeks, the U.S. death toll soared past 100,000. That is triple the number of flu deaths over an entire year. It's surpassed yearly opioid and suicide deaths combined. It's more than all U.S. combat deaths since the Korean war combined. And that's just in the U.S.A. which has the highest fatality count. Worldwide, families grieve over 350,000 loved ones lost. Pardon me for recalling such sobering data. Facts are stubborn things. It is not yet time for a pool party or a congregational gathering.

We make our own decisions as a congregation. I encourage the congregation to stay united and **base those decisions, on three things: good data, good science and good theology.**

**Good Data:** A key threshold for initial consideration about re-engaging in-person worship is 21 consecutive days of decline in COVID 19 cases. Good data come from direct sources like the CDC, or Ohio.gov. It's best to avoid information coming from sources with political bias. At Richfield UCC we do not make our church decisions based on politics, spin, so called "culture wars."

**Good Science:** Ideally, we would like to see a vaccine, but that may take a long time. As we observe loosening restrictions and behaviors that show carelessness about social distancing, more COVID-19 cases are projected. Let's face it, the demographics of most church congregations skew toward a population that is older and at higher risk of complications from COVID-19. Good science tells us that we are safer when we avoid gatherings and wear masks when gathering is unavoidable.

**Good Theology:** Jesus calls his disciples to "*Love one another*" (John 13:34). These days, love means staying away. "*There is a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing*" (Ecclesiastes 3:5). Good theology calls us to care for one another intelligently and respectfully. We will use technology to live stream. We will use the power of the pen to write our legislators to protect the 27 million Americans who have lost employer-based healthcare just when they need it most due to COVID-19. Why? Jesus said our salvation depends on this: "*I was sick and you took care of me.*" (Matthew 25:36). Compassion takes many forms, and these days building the Kingdom of God can take the form of a mask and a laptop computer.

Some churches have said "We need faith, not fear," as they continued to gather with bold faith and deadly consequences. Rev. Gerald Glenn kept gathering his congregation in Virginia, preaching "God is larger than this dreaded virus." He died of COVID-19, infecting members of his church and family. The story is repeated as pastors, choirs and congregations gathered with fatal results. I disagree with such theology and behavior because it inflicts harm.

Some of our church members and employees are older, have compromised immune systems. They or their families are vulnerable. If they were to lose their lives as a result of our behavior, are we willing to accept that so that we can gather? I find it unconscionable.

We don't need to open our churches to practice our faith. We do, however, need to open our hearts to practice our faith. We need to take care of one another. We need to open our minds and make smart decisions. We have the technology to meet safely online. No, it's not exactly the same. But putting ourselves and one another in danger during a time of contagion can be reckless to the point of being harmful and yes, sinful.

Love one another. Do no harm.