

Regathering Update – Changes Set for October 2

September 16, 2022

Dear Friends –

I'm not generally the crier in my family – unless it's a particularly moving Kleenex commercial, or a really good sports movie, it's just not my first instinct. This summer, however, I was the one who had to stay in the car while Carolyn and Sarah went inside the walk-in vaccine clinic. I knew that my tears might frighten Carolyn, and it would be difficult to explain that they were because I was so happy.



The relief I felt was immense. Over and over in the past few years she has been exposed to the coronavirus in extremely close ways – children around her have become quite sick, and evidently, I had carried the tension within my very body that we would bring this virus home to someone we cared about in our family, in our community, or in this congregation.

It felt nothing short of miraculous that these little shots could so effectively reduce those risks. It felt nothing short of miraculous that this little shot could protect this piece of my heart walking around outside my body, that this little prick of her shoulder could release so much tension I had been carrying for so long, and that this tension should release itself in tears.

Gathering with our Covid Response Team this week, we discussed how many of us have felt similar sensations – when our children have been vaccinated, or our beloveds, or ourselves. And I know many of us still carry this tension within ourselves for those who are severely immune-compromised. So, when we met to discuss the next stages in our Covid protocols, we did not take the discussion lightly. We thoroughly reviewed the survey results from two weeks ago, as well as the original “P.E.A.C.E.” guidelines that we put out near the beginning of the pandemic ([linked here](#)). Joined by members of the Executive Council as well, we considered current CDC guidelines and current levels of Covid transmission in the county.

As a result of this careful conversation and research, we are going to make changes in the next few weeks that put us in line with our original P.E.A.C.E. plan, as viewed through the light of new scientific understanding of this pandemic. The changes, outlined below, and approved by our Board of Trustees, will take place on Sunday, October 2. We hope this will give everyone a chance to be made aware of the changes and process them within their own family safety needs.

While the overwhelming majority (more than 90%, of our survey respondents) will likely welcome this news, we do understand that there are those for whom these changes will likely bring changes to, and sadness about, the way they participate in church. Again, we do not take that consideration lightly. We will continue to do our best to provide quality digital options, as well as to keep abreast of changes in the Covid transmission and treatment in our area. As we originally put forth, increases in transmission rates will, of course, cause us to reevaluate our protocols throughout the fall.

In some ways it feels like I am writing this letter a mere hairs-breadth of time since our original guidelines were posted. In other ways, it feels like so much has changed, that this “new reality” of Covid has become routine. I hope you will join me in understanding that, as has been the case over the last 2 1/2 years, flexibility will be the key for us to continue to create a welcoming, safe space and beloved community.

If you have any questions about these guidelines, or the process used to make these decisions, we do hope you will contact any member of our Covid Response Team, Trustees, or Executive Council, who are passing these changes along to you prayerfully and in faith.

With gratitude,



[The Rev. Elissa Johnk](#), Lead Minister

As of October 2, 2022 at First Congregational Church:

1. Masks will move from being required to *recommended*. This is in line with our guidelines that stated that we would move to this recommendation when Chittenden County was at a less than 1% positivity rate, combined with a majority of our congregation being vaccinated.
2. Teams will have the option of meeting in person, as long as a viable remote option is available. If teams decide to meet at the church, the best rooms for remote access are the Chapel and the Stone Room, which are recommended.
3. Staff will have the autonomy to make their own decisions about masking in their own respective spaces. Please respect a staff member's decision if they ask you to mask in their personal spaces.
4. The Possibility Shop will continue with its occupancy limits for the time being.
5. As "percent positivity" has become an outdated model for understanding covid transmission, the team is working to evaluate what new standard will be used – likely some variation of the CDC risk assessment ([linked here](#)) and hospital bed rates.