



*An Open and Affirming Congregation  
Of the United Church of Christ*

February 22, 2021

*First Church is a welcoming, vibrant congregation seeking to deepen our faith and follow Jesus' example in pursuing justice and caring for each other, the community, and God's world.*

### Members and Friends of First Church

One year ago, our congregation was vibrant, exciting, and experiencing a renewed sense of vision and purpose. Entering the season of Lent, the chapel was packed for the first of our weekly Wednesday evening Lenten worship services, as we initiated a collective period of purposeful reflection in preparation for our joyous celebration of resurrection and new life on Easter. Then COVID-19 changed our world and what we collectively value and experience as “our church.”

As Council, we were faced with the uncomfortable and difficult decisions to pivot from in-person to virtual ways to continue our ministry. The scientific and medical evidence of the devastating impacts of COVID-19, and the rising incidence of COVID in New Haven County propelled us to take action to cancel all in-person ministries. The closing of all non-essential businesses and restrictions on gatherings by the State of Connecticut were mandates that we followed. But fundamentally, we were driven by our collective commitment to the welfare of our congregation, our staff, and our community.

We have carefully monitored COVID trends, sought advice from our medical advisory team, followed the guidance of our denomination, the United Church of Christ, and from the State over the past year as we sought to provide the best possible opportunities for us to engage in all the aspects of ministry. The absence of in-person contact for worship, education, caring, music, celebration, and friendship has been difficult for all of us. In fact, it feels like the entire year has been a Lenten experience.

Recently, there are signs of hope. Vaccinations are being delivered, and Connecticut has been very successful in its distribution. COVID positivity rates, hospitalizations, and death trends are improving. Governor Lamont has announced reduced restrictions beginning in March. A small number of churches across the state have opened their doors to indoor services. Even so, New Haven county is still in the “red” category of COVID positivity and new, more virulent strains of COVID are creating more uncertainty and anxiety.

So, we have embraced a ministry approach that maintains the need to avoid the use of the church building out of a deep sense of care and concern for everyone of every age in our congregation and in our community. The detailed Lenten calendar includes a creative hybrid of virtual and outdoor worship and fellowship activities as we continue to evaluate the timeline and potential ways to return indoors. Frankly, our hearts yearn for re-gathering, when that is prudent and safe.

While we have charted a course for the near-term based on our best information, guidance and intention, we understand that we are all missing “church” as we once knew it. We also know that there are gaps in our ability to minister that are not being met, no matter how many Zoom meetings or outdoor services we conduct. Ultimately, we know that church is so much more than preaching or music. Church is life. Church is connection – with each other and with the Spirit of Christ.

### **Prayer**

God, in the trial of this pandemic, we trust in you and your promises. Grant the power and the wisdom to discern our path forward with integrity, courage, compassion, and love for one another. Grant us all peace. Amen.

Signed: Church Council Members

*Andrew Irish, President*

*Tracy Tyree, President-Election*

*James Redeker*

*Jack Sellati*

*Christine Fitzmaurice*

*Nancy Stover*