



FIRST PARISH CHURCH OF STOW AND ACTON

353 Great Road, Stow, Massachusetts 01775

www.fpc-stow-acton.org • (978) 897-8149

Rev. Dr. Cynthia L. Landrum, Minister

May 9, 2020

His Excellency Charlie Baker
Governor of Massachusetts
Massachusetts State House
Office of the Governor
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Governor Baker,

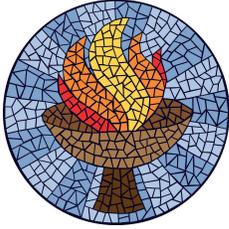
Thank you for your leadership of our Commonwealth during this crisis. I've appreciated living in a state where our governor is not rushing to reopen too hastily at the cost of countless lives. Your decisions to close schools and businesses were done with careful consideration of the consequences and were a needed response to this growing epidemic.

My fellow clergy cite that "marijuana dispensaries, liquor stores and abortion clinics" have been allowed to open while places of worship have not. I understand this sounds sensational and elicits an immediate response from some people, but a deeper analysis makes it clear why each of these is necessary to keep open for the physical health of our citizens. I am glad that women have access to reproductive health services, that pain management is available, and that those struggling with addiction are not forced to go through physically harmful immediate and sudden withdrawal. Withdrawal from in-person church services is not a threat to our physical health.

While numerous fellow clergy signed a letter urging you to put churches in the first wave of openings as an "essential business," I'm writing to urge you to do just the opposite. While the work of churches is essential in the way we care for people and bring them hope through this hard time, this work can be done without reopening our buildings. We've adapted quickly and efficiently to this new reality, and are providing worship services through multiple platforms, reaching out to our members through electronic means, and keeping connections, hope, and faith strong through this time. We can continue to do so.

I know churches are struggling with the closure. We've faced drop-offs in rental income, pledge income, and fundraiser income. Some members are finding it hard to connect virtually. We miss, as clergy, the ability to be at the bedside of our members in the hospital. It's particularly painful to tell families they cannot have an in-person funeral or memorial service in our houses of worship.

However, despite the economic and other very real hardships from remaining closed, churches and other houses of worship should actually be in the *last* phase of organizations allowed to



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reopen. Houses of worship are among the most deadly places with this virus. The reasons why we need to stay closed are many, including:

- Early spread of the virus was significant and serious in houses of worship, including at weddings,ⁱ funerals,ⁱⁱ choir practice,ⁱⁱⁱ and worship services.
- Our services quite often involve singing, which is a particularly high-risk activity.^{iv}
- We bring together large groups of people, often into a space where social distancing requirements would be difficult to achieve.
- We serve intergenerational and diverse groups, which include many elderly citizens as well as people in numerous other high-risk categories, bringing together people who would not congregate with each other in other circumstances, thus widening the social circles and allowing the virus to spread more easily.

We are anxious to be back together, singing together, mourning together, celebrating together, worshipping together. Doing these things are, indeed, essential to the spirits of the people of the Commonwealth. But the way we do our work is very different from “accountants, lawyers, and other workers.” Lawyers aren’t holding group singing. Accountants aren’t sitting by the bedside of sick clients. Other businesses that bring together large groups of people into an auditorium and seat them closely together will not be in the first wave of businesses opening.

It is not a violation of our freedom to worship to ask us not to do so in our buildings. We worship freely every day. Please do not urge houses of worship to open too soon. There’s every reason why we should not be in the first phase.

Sincerely,

Rev. Dr. Cynthia Landrum

First Parish Church of Stow and Acton, Unitarian Universalist

ⁱ <https://www.wbtv.com/2020/04/17/covid-outbreaks-traced-wedding-other-small-gatherings-cabarrus-county/>

ⁱⁱ https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/a-funeral-sparked-a-covid-19-outbreak--and-led-to-many-more-funerals/2020/04/03/546fa0cc-74e6-11ea-87da-77a8136c1a6d_story.html

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-03-29/coronavirus-choir-outbreak>

^{iv} <https://www.middleclassartist.com/post/nats-panel-of-experts-lays-out-sobering-future-for-singers-no-vaccine-no-safe-public-singing>