

VISCOM REPORT

Introduction

Last Spring (2020), the Deacons suggested at Church Council that a study be done to look at the impact of the COVID virus on the church community. A committee was formed, named VISCOM - Virus Impact Study Committee - and given the following charge:

To study the impact the COVID 19 virus has had on various aspects of the church community, how that impact is being mitigated, and is that working/not working. Also to determine which aspects of mitigation might be retained after the virus.

The committee was formed, including the following people: Donna Johnson, Frank Neal, Mary Ann Donaldson, Joy Paine, Lissa Gilbert, Dale Bengtson, and Sally Anderson.

The aspects of the church community to be studied include the following:

Worship/Program

Use of the Building - including tenancy

Clergy and Staff

Congregation

Work of the Church - boards, communication, wider mission/advocacy

Finances

This report includes the “fact-finding”, ie, the impact and mitigation aspects, with some analysis. The committee suggests that further analysis be done in order to determine what aspects of mitigation be retained.

Many thanks to all the the VISCOM members who put it many hours of work on this report!

VISCOM Thoughts after eleven months of Virtual Church

Eleven months ago, I, along with Joy Paine, was asked to assess how members and friends were experiencing Second Church in their lives since gathering is no longer possible and worship and meetings are virtual. There was especially an interest in evaluating the impact of the Church's mitigating offerings such as recorded Sunday Worship, post Church coffee hour, and Wednesday Dinner Church on ZOOM. Pastor Carla's weekly emails, jigsaw puzzle exchange, Pastor Carla's candles, regular contact of members with each other (especially for those isolated, home bound), candles distributed to all members, other activities which were available earlier and some available more recently including once a month meal preparation for Bristol Lodge, activities including a guided tour at Mt Auburn Cemetery and recent Scavenger Hunt in West Newton. I have not done systematic surveying but as one who participates in almost all of the above and was already telephoning (as I used to visit) a number of homebound, mostly older folk, I have a few observations to share.

First, there is a very small number of people who either do not have or use often a computer. There is some contact with those and just today I observed generous assistance being given by one member to another in this group. It is hard for some, however, to maintain connection and it often they who reach out. The Spire and other USPS mailings are very important to them.

There was organized systematic reaching out to some members for reasons of age or possible isolation arranged by Pastor Carla and Administrator Barbara Cancellieri after the ceasing of worship in the Sanctuary. These contacts have been surely helpful and some strong (It should be mentioned that social media, especially Facebook, where the Worship service also appears, provides contact among some members, though except for worship this is not a Church mitigation.) A small and fairly regular group including staff, from 12 to 25 have small informal group conversations on Zoom at 11 Sunday mornings. Six to nine people gather for Dinner Church on the same platform. Certainly, a large number, not known to me, watch worship on Sunday-or later in the week. A growing group share Bristol Lodge meal preparation (done in homes and picked up and delivered by leaders). Activities planned have had relatively small participation except for the scavenger hunt. Of course, there is a core of leaders who are busy with the many virtual meetings necessary to "keep the Church running."

My feeling is that the Church means various things to people and that during this time people are not experiencing it as a Sunday morning "thing". Some are grateful for the recorded worship service to continue to be their corporate worship experience; a few-the Scripture reader and participating choir- actually experience participating in a bit of the service. Some "visit" other churches' services "on line" or Youtube, as well. Some are grateful for the social contact or are committed to the service opportunities. Some feel connected but no need to participate. Some read the biweekly Second Church News email. Many give to the Church. Most have settled into a pattern of activity or lack of it related/connected to Second Church but make individual choices about participating. We can only continue to be sensitive to individual needs and try to respond to them as far as possible while sharing our "love".

COVID-19 June-2020 to December 31, 2020

The following are notations taken from member questioning both formally and casually from early in the Covid changes until recently. Since the mitigations and new ideas have been evolving as time as gone on, early responses don't necessarily hold now. The listing was begun in mid- June. We had experienced almost 2 months of church shut-down and mitigation steps.

Late Spring SPIRE:

Andrus relates the challenges orchestrating choirs, soloists, instrumentalists in Covid-19 restrictions.

6/15/20 Leah's impact report was an excellent source for assessments pros and cons of programs under her oversight.

You-Tube Childrens 'story circle, parents like to have ability to play it any time, but no conversation with kids is a negative. Digital Bible Study was static.

Special FCI only had one log in.

Dinner Church smaller by still an important connection for those who are usually involved.

New programs were hardest hit.

Church business may be better conducted on Zoom. Note Leah's comments in her June report as well as those about about You Tube services.

6/20 Random individual comments on Covid impact of what was lost due to shut down:

Losses: worship in church, community/renters are not using building, building and office(partially closed). Program: no coffee hours, forums, special programmiing, church picnics, or social events. Feelings: isolation, lack of community, hampers works of ad hocs. Empty church lacks warmth in YouTube Services. Music feels disconnected in presentation. Livelier hymns and music needed when vitual. Younger singers were excellent.

Mixed Interview Comments

7/20 Summer BLM discussion groups were A+ , missing Sunday Church Service in the sanctuary impact is individual; fears are individual. Once folks got accustomed to Zoom meetings, they became a useful mode of meeting. We should get better equipment to record services and to use after Covid leaves.

8/20 Unable to use technology, a member depends on church friends calling to chat and keep up.

Relationships help to mitigate not being able to participate in services or virtual events.

10/20 Summer format was a nice change up. Small group breakouts can get too small. Services are ok; recording improved, but empty church boring. Coffee hours aren't as large,

on ZOOM, but they do allow for better concentration for conversation.

10/20 Efforts for mitigation are appreciated. Still member feels disconnected. The Vespers were quite nice. Could there be times set aside for spiritual hours of quiet in sanctuary following rules of Covid? Just quiet time without need of music or Pastors.

12/20 Much thought and effort were put into the virtual Thanksgiving and Christmas services. While difficult to mitigate the decorative traditions of Christmas, the Altar Team adapted well to a simplification of the process for this year. Glitches in video connections were unfortunate.

Credit should be given to the team (especially Laura Foote) that put together the Christmas West Newton Hunt. It was very popular and could have another incarnation in the future. A highlight.

PS. The quality of virtual services offered by various area churches during Covid-19 has varied. While not giving the feel of the church community that usually occupies the pews,

visiting different services allows for the opportunity to hear their message and hear their

music. Important consideration for future focus or any growth.

VIRUS IMPACT STUDY

Fact Finding

Area of Study: Treasurer's Office /Finances

Source - Mary Ayotte, bookkeeper , Dale Bengtson

What **impact** has COVID 19 had on this aspect of the church community?

- Income sources
 - Donations – have been fairly consistent... many members continue to mail in their gifts
 - A few “regular givers” have recently switches to online /Vanco giving. This makes the giving more “predictable” but we do pay a processing fee for this added convenience (between 2 & 3% depending on “payment method” – e-checks a bit lower than Visa/Mastercard credit cards which is a bit lower than AmEx/Discover)
 - Rental – no “AA”, etc. Rhythm of rent payment by Tenants is unchanged (Clearway consistently runs behind by about a month).
 - Refunds to Nursery School families – are still to be determined...
- Expenses –most programming/expenses are “down” (no spring cantata this year = no hired instrumentalists, no “parish life” and “faith formation” events, etc.).
- General treasurer's office operations – The disruption of operations created challenges for the Treasurer's office especially with regard to timely invoice processing. Most staff continued to be present on site or were consistently available and/or responsive to calls/emails. Unresponsive staff was a source of frustration and the extra work of chasing coworkers during the pandemic was particularly upsetting especially when combined with the administrative work associated with the Payroll Protection Program.
- **Update to church giving (as of January 2021):** The number of giving units has gone up slightly, but the total pledges are somewhat smaller. Pledging to Benevolence has increased somewhat.

What has been done to **mitigate** (lessen the effect of) that impact?

- Payroll Protection

- Applying for, closing on and paperwork associated with the “Payroll Protection Program” was administratively challenging but the proceeds have been effectively utilized.
- The secured financing helped keep us going and allowed us to continue operations without drawing from our Endowment.
- We were grateful not to have to draw from the Endowment while our investments were somewhat “deflated” during the pandemic and the ensuing Market volatility.
- The next challenge will be working on validating the “forgiveable” nature of the use of the funds.

Is that mitigation **working/not working**? Explain.

- Treasurer’s office will continue to adapt to the challenges and I am grateful for Carla’s leadership as well as Dale’s flexibility and support during these shaky times.
- Return to more regular “in person” contact with colleagues who are also keeping “regular” hours will help as well.

I look forward to seeing the smiling faces of the Second Church community around the building again. I have missed the “pace” of our community – not only the Second Church staff and volunteers but also the Clearway staff, the Al-Anon program leaders and the families coming and going during Nursery School drop off/pickup. It’s been too darned quiet!

VISCOM 1/21/21

AREA OF STUDY : 2nd Church building , tenants, staff other users

IMPACT ON THE ABOVE : (1) Dorshei has ceased their normal religious services but rabbi conducts small meetings physically with individual members on limited basis . Rabbi and senior admin staff come to the building on limited times, mostly once weekly. (2) Clearway and SCNS conduct physical classes for their students, but numbers appear to be down. Outdoor classes and meetings are emphasized when possible. Strict measures for safety and sanitization are followed by faculty and staff. Awareness of Covid is always very much in mind . (3) Sunday 2nd Church services and coffee hours are ceased. (4) Church staff are on site on limited daily basis but with at least either Barbara, Carla or Frank in the building at all times during the day, on a staggered basis. (4) Self- help groups continue to meet, but meetings appear to be curtailed, shorter and with smaller numbers.

MITIGATION STEPS: Carla from 2nd Church and Toba from Doshei create weekly religious service videos in their respective sanctuaries and then make these available to members of their congregation on line. 2nd Church also holds weekly dinner services lead by Leah on ZOOM. Much other correspondence with Church members is conducted through email and snail mail, and group meetings are held on ZOOM. Clearway conducts a fair amount of learning remotely so it has this flexibility today with all its students. Safety protocols have been written up and distributed to all the tenants and other users of the building, and these are being closely monitored and followed by students and faculty. SCNS uses only the chestnut St. entrance to the parish house; Clearway uses only the “highway” entrance, and all their classrooms, bathrooms and offices are restricted to the 2nd floor. Both SCNS and Clearway staff thoroughly clean and disinfect their space at the end of each day; all wear masks at all times , and people are encouraged to keep at safe distances, wash hands and use hand sanitizer – which is placed everywhere within their respective spaces. Finally, The Church has assigned the janitor John Malone to concentrate cleaning and sanitizing only in the parish house , each night, 5 days/week. Itemized checklists for cleaning are posted in each bathroom for him to fill out and initial each night, and there is another checklist for the rest of the building area for him to initial as well; both are reviewed by the property manager on a daily basis.

IS MITIGATION EFFECTIVE OR NOT: I would say that the experiences with teachers and students in the 2 schools has been surprisingly successful, and I have not been informed by the directors (which is mandated) that any of their staff or students have contracted the virus. Everyone is wary however, and trying to be careful; there is some trepidation evidently felt by members of the school staffs and by the Church staff, especially after Carla and her family came down with the thing. I think most members of the 2 religious organizations believe normality won't be able to be re-established until late spring at least. And this will also be effected by whether people have been able to receive the 2 vaccine shots – which at this point is simply not clear. Nor is it clear what level of protection the vaccine will afford and

for how long, or how we should conduct ourselves after vaccination. Finally, members of both congregations fear the longer the Covid scare and lockdown continues, that their numbers may/will

potentially diminish. For the Church, at least, I'm informed that our pledging is doing well and that most members I've spoken with look forward to be able to return to our normal operations as soon as possible.

I think the directors of the 2 schools are also concerned about the future health of their programs, although the need for early childhood ed in Newton remains very high. The need for special need high school education is also critical in the area and throughout Massachusetts. Since both these programs at the church are strong and enjoy extremely positive reputations, I expect both will survive and prosper, as long as the directors, teachers and staff stay generally healthy.

Area of Study: Clergy and Staff

Date: January 2021

Submitted by: Sally Anderson

MARY AYOTTE - BOOKKEEPER

Impact:

- Workload has remained the same with some exceptions- PPE application, managing cash flow, making bank deposits (banks are closed), less items in weekly “offerings” deposit, less processing of Nursery School disbursement and payroll.

Mitigation:

- support of other staff in terms of less predictable work schedule due to other work commitments and children home.

FRANK NEAL - BUILDING MANAGER

Impact:

- Work focus on accommodating tenants in decision-making regarding re-opening, and keeping the building clean and healthy for those who do use it. The Nursery School was most impacted - some structural changes in classrooms, and emphasis on cleaning. Clearway also had to change schedule and re-think use of specific rooms.
- More recently work has focused on re-opening of the sanctuary.

Mitigation:

- Working with Carla and the Re-Opening Task Force has supported Frank in all of this work.

BARBARA CANCELLIERI - OFFICE ADMINISTRATOR

Impact:

- Early on in the pandemic, since the building was closed, Barbara had to work from home - mainly working on the accounting book. She returned to the building in April, working 3 days/week for 3/4 hours each day. Since the usual everyday work was minimal, she used the time to catch up on other projects such as membership statistics and helping Carla with the bi-weekly Constant Contact.

Mitigation:

- Barbara feels that “if Carla and Mary had not been able to use the building the impact and lack of communication would have been huge”.

LEAH RUMSEY - DIRECTOR OF FAITH FORMATION

Impact:

- harder to connect with people - even with technology, some can't access it and some (parents) are so busy with managing children's school and jobs, that they really don't want anymore screen time.
- puts her in "management mode" - trying to figure out whom to connect to and how. Trying to figure out other ways of connection
- not being able to eat together. Eating together is her "go to trick" for creating relationships - Dinner Church.

Mitigation:

- alternative delivery methods - don't really lessen the impact, but find ways around it:
 - Children's story via YouTube - although still loss of valuable conversation
 - Digital Bible Study - link in Story Circle video
 - Faith and Citizenship Institute had a Zoom check in, but again, zoom Fatigue can be overwhelming.
 - Dinner Church has continued via Zoom - smaller group, but still important

Is Mitigation working?

- programs that were working well before, continue to work, although with smaller attendance. Story Circle actually engages for people in virtual format.
- Faith and Citizenship Institute was just beginning to re-build and has lost a year in doing that.

Things that are effective and worth continuing:

- Putting Story Circle on YouTube
- Providing opportunity to Zoom into Dinner Church and 2030's Bible Study in addition to in person format.
- Continue to held business meetings (board meetings, etc) in virtual format. People seems to respect the time better and stay on task. Cuts down on side conversations.
- Posting the Sunday Worship service on YouTube - available to broader community.

Carla Bailey - Senior Pastor

Pastoral Care/Community

Impact:

- loss of spontaneous pastoral connections - now all have to be intentional
- concern about those who do not have means of digital communication

Mitigation:

- Zoom meetings, coffee hour
- other Zoom program opportunities - readings, chats, book groups

Worship

Impact:

- absence of in person Sunday worship
- loss of spontaneity of connection before, during, and after worship
- absence of warmth of greeting and seeing one another
- sacrament of communion is challenging - found it difficult to “record”
- loss of “shared experience” of worshipping together

Mitigation:

- pre-recording of worship service, including music, readings, sermon, prayers
- “performance” quality is good, and service can be viewed at any time after 8 AM on Sunday
- Zoom coffee hour is a good time for people to communicate with large and small groups
- Dinner Church continues in virtual format
- Summer services continued in an issue-related forum format - meaningful discussions

Is it working?

- virtual format has allowed us to continue worship, but still only those who have internet access
- quality of virtual worship has increased due to work of John Ferrera and investment in better sound equipment

It would be beneficial to continue the recording of our worship services to accommodate those who cannot attend in person.

Administrative and Institutional Life

Impact:

- Boards and committees cannot meet in person
- some impact on staff hours (in some cases).
- demands on Barbara have decreased
- we may want to look at staff structure if COVID restrictions continue

Mitigation:

- Virtual board and committee meetings
- John Ferrera's hours have actually increased due to recording needs

Is it working?

- Zoom board format is successful and actually imposes more "discipline" on participants to speak one at a time and not while others are speaking.
- the camaraderie of being together for meetings is missing.
- it is likely that we will consider continuing the virtual board meeting format in some way

Andrus Madsen - Minister of Music

Impact:

- Choir no longer able to meet
- No in person worship

Mitigation:

- Initially, hymns were recorded with only soloist and Andrus participating, but eventually choir members began recording from home and sending that into Andrus.
- Entire worship service was recorded and put on church website and YouTube
- "Production" quality improved as better equipment was purchased and software was upgraded and Andrus's learning curve improved.

VISCOM Report for Annual Meeting, The Second Church in Newton
This Section Submitted by Joy Ann J. Paine
January 24, 2021

The members of the Congregation to whom I spoke and contacted for my part of the Virus Impact Study Committee (VISCOM) were those under 80, families with school-aged children, and the 2030's. I designed a questionnaire format that I followed in my conversations. I recorded responses and then could roughly tabulate responses.

The first time I talked to/contacted people was late June to early July. People were adjusting to life in the pandemic. Fortunately, it seemed no one was impacted by financial hardship in the group. They liked having virtual Sunday services and Coffee Hour. However, personal interaction in our church community was missed. Desire for outdoor services during the summer, having activities, and disappointment in not having summer worship services were expressed. People really liked having personal contact with a friend from the church community.

I went back to a number of people from the first interview in late September. Overall, they adjusted to life in the pandemic, and they found ways to get away during the summer with available outdoor options and some also saw family. Once again, they liked talking to a friend from the church community, but it was clear that they felt they were losing their connection to the church. Not only did they miss the community of the church, but they felt disconnected. Virtual services no longer filled their spiritual needs. There was a desire for more personal interaction. People said they would like more communication from the church leaders as well as creative and alternative ways to worship.

Hence, the task was made clear - - to communicate more and to find creative and alternative ways to safely worship together, perhaps in small groups in order to follow pandemic guidelines. However, getting together has become even more daunting because of the increasing number of cases of COVID since the holidays, the new variant strains of the virus, and cold weather that keeps people inside. It is much more challenging to find ways to proceed safely and to maintain a presence of Second Church.

It is worth noting that there have been offerings to our church community, enabling us to simulate togetherness and community. Some things even raised our presence in the wider Newton Community such as the banner over the front doors of the church showing our support for Black Lives Matter, Science, Climate, etc. Other steps taken for our spiritual lives as well as community have been the Music Vespers held in the Sanctuary with masks and distancing and opening the church on Election Day, November 3, to pray for our country during a contentious election. People have had a service opportunity by preparing meals for Bristol Lodge, led by Lissa Gilbert and Martha Felch. During the Christmas Season, a very successful neighborhood Scavenger Hunt was held, thanks to Parish Life and Laura Foote who initiated the activity and created the questions for the scavengers. People were in teams, but completed the search safely with communication and with people in their own pods. This activity generated enthusiasm and community spirit, ending with a ZOOM follow up. For various reasons, not everyone has been able to participate in the offerings for community, service, and worship. The onus is on us to be more inclusive.

We are in a strange and somewhat dark time, but we have an obligation to meet the challenges we face in a safe yet creative way. The old ways of worship need to morph into new and uncharted ways to meet the needs of our spiritual lives. The present time is much beyond anything we faced in our work in Crossroads or perhaps in our over 200 year history as a church. I am hopeful that we will find a path to

The phrase, “Final Thoughts” rather than “Conclusions”, is used here because more analysis could be done to actually draw conclusions from the material that has been collected for this report. There are, however, some common themes that seemed to appear:

Crises evolve and, therefore, mitigation efforts have to evolve as well. Throughout the crisis of COVID 19, federal, state, and local mandates and regulations have changed (and are still changing!), sometimes causing confusion, fear, and mistrust. Mitigation efforts require continual re-evaluation and flexibility is key.

Communication is very important.

For many people in our congregation, the Sunday worship service is the primary means of communication. That face to face, human contact is very important. When it became clear that the COVID virus was going to prevent that contact, we immediately began to find alternatives. The **virtual worship service** became the central focus of the week, along with the **virtual coffee hour**. The Weekly Newsletter became a Bi-weekly Newsletter, and the Spire was sent out several times. It soon became clear that there is a group in our congregation that does not access virtual/digital communication (for a variety of reasons), so, for them, the worship service was not available. Many people gave very generously of their time to make phone calls to people who did not access the virtual/digital formate. The conclusion here is that while the virtual worship formate is a viable alternative to in person worship, it is not a substitute. The congregation yearns for a return to usual manner of communing with each other. In the future, hopefully, we can do both, so that people who are not able to attend worship on any given Sunday, can attend a virtual service through the website.

The work of the church continues.

Even though challenged with mask-wearing and social distancing, the staff and clergy have continued to do their work. Some hours have changed and in-person meetings have been reduced, but the work is getting done. This is certainly a credit to our staff and clergy, and the early mitigation done in the church building. The **virtual format for board meetings** has been very successful and may be something we want to continue in some form. There is always the possibility of “Zoom burnout”, as many board members are working in a virtual format as well, but in general it worked well. Some said that ‘meeting etiquette’ is better in the virtual format, as there are fewer side conversations, and people seem to focus more on the meeting topics.

Overall Second Church has done a good job dealing with the challenges of COVID 19. Mitigation efforts have been mostly effective and have evolved in order to meet the ongoing challenges. We have learned a lot and found somethings that actually enhance our worship and work, which we may want to continue.