

Friday, June 5th, 2020

Returning to in-person worship in the Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth: A Phase-based approach

I write to communicate a phased approach for returning to in-person worship in the Diocese of Fort Worth. I would like to begin by expressing gratitude to all who have worked so faithfully and tirelessly to adapt our ways of worship, study, outreach, and pastoral care during this COVID-19 crisis. Next, I want to acknowledge that our current reality is in a context of deep grief in the Diocese of Fort Worth, resulting not only from nation-wide realities of the COVID-19 pandemic and racial injustice, but also the recent adverse decision from the Supreme Court of Texas in our longstanding legal efforts to recover resources generously given so that all may know God's love for every human being and all creation. Because of all of these losses, as well as accompanying economic struggles, it is highly likely that every one of us has experienced some level of loss. And as the Apostle Paul writes, we weep with those who weep. Finally, as we have physically distanced ourselves from one another, our longing to "be together" reveals that human beings are designed to be connected; we are created to be in communion as one human family.

The guiding principle for what follows comes from the words of Jesus: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

WHY A PHASED APPROACH?

A phased approach provides a vision for:

- Imagination about our future
- Helping everyone understand the reality of our situation
- Beginning to put into place adaptive mission options
- Creating agility across regional contexts

We entered the COVID-19 pandemic (globally, nationally, and locally) through a phased approach. It feels as though we entered it all at once, but we did not. We saw the virus move through phases of initial contagion then to community spread. Likewise, we saw churches move through phases of instruction: washing hands, no peace, no cup, physical distancing. Our work here, as we anticipate returning to in-person worship, is to lean into the clarity of a phased approach rather than the certainty of a date approach.

PHASE I-STAY AT HOME, NO IN-PERSON WORSHIP, VIRTUAL GATHERINGS ONLY
(We are currently in this phase.)

Phase I is characterized by widespread community spread of the virus, a shortage of medical supplies, a lack of availability of a vaccine, therapeutics, countermeasures, and protective supplies. In response we are staying at home, participating in workshops via the internet, and meeting online for social connection, Christian formation, and leadership meetings.

PHASE II-RETURN TO IN-PERSON WORSHIP, WITH SOCIAL DISTANCING RESTRICTIONS

Much of the rest of this document will deal with when and how we enter into Phase II. The most important reminder is that even when in-person worship resumes, we will not "get back to normal" for some time.

Because of the adverse decision of the Supreme Court of Texas, it may be that 1/3 of our congregations are required to leave their long-standing, beloved places of worship sometime in Summer or Fall 2020, therefore the phased approach in the Diocese of Fort Worth will allow some flexibility for congregations to worship in their buildings while maintaining appropriate precautions.

PHASE III-RESUMPTION OF NORMAL ACTIVITIES

One day we will enter Phase III, which will be characterized by negative community spread, mass vaccination, mass therapeutic availability, mass testing for virus and immunity, and a lifting of physical distancing.

We are not sure when we will enter Phase III, but we believe that if we do this well, we will emerge from the pandemic prepared for future disasters but with the added benefit of missional learning and increased abilities in virtual worship, virtual meetings, and pastoral ministry.

In Phase III, all will be strongly encouraged to continue a hybrid of in-person and virtual worship, utilizing the structural platforms for live-streaming that have been built.

WHEN WILL WE RESTART IN-PERSON WORSHIP (ENTER PHASE II)?

The decision to begin worshipping in-person again is one that is made by the rector/clergy-in-charge with the approval of the bishop, and the approval of state and local authorities.

The keys we are looking for are 14 days of declining COVID-19 cases in the county(ies) from which the congregation draws worshippers, and local hospitals that are not overloaded. Only at this point may churches begin to meet in person after securing the specific permission of the bishop, though we will need to practice health protocols, including physical distancing, throughout Phase II.

We know that having the diocesan churches opening at different times will be difficult. This is an inherent problem with having a large diocese spread over 24 counties, with churches in cities and towns of very different sizes and local cultures.

As testing, treatments, and community-spread data now varies from place to place within the diocese, we cannot expect to resume in-person worship together as a diocese. Therefore,

congregations will have to work with the bishop to identify the best time to move into Phase II protocols using locally available data.

Congregations that host community groups (such as AA) will need to consult with the bishop to seek specific permission to have them resume meeting in our church buildings. Provision should be made for cleaning the meeting space and providing cleaning supplies for these groups.

It is permissible for congregations to add a phase to the re-entry process. For example, a large congregation might discern a need to re-enter with a specific limited number at in-person worship. A small congregation might discern the need to begin in-person worship outdoors.

It is also permissible for rectors/clergy-in-charge to request approval from the bishop to use alternative liturgies, such as the Ministration of Spiritual Communion, for those who do not feel safe offering or receiving the Sacrament at this time.

Special provision may need to be made for liturgies such as Baptism and Funerals. Consult with the bishop regarding permission to make adaptations in unusual circumstances.

FOREWARNING

It is possible that after regathering, a person may expose the congregation to the COVID-19 virus. If that happens, those gathered will be asked to return to a 14-day quarantine period and a church may have to return to virtual worship during that period. It is also possible that after regathering the community in which the congregation exists re-institutes Phase I "stay at home" restrictions. If that happens, churches will be asked to return to virtual worship until their city or town returns to conditions appropriate to re-enter Phase II.

PHASE II QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

While guidance as to specific practices is given in another section below, it is also important for each congregation, in their own context, to engage with and consider practical questions, as follows:

1. How many people can your worship space hold, with people wearing masks, in family groups sitting six feet apart, and with every other row roped-off/left empty?
2. How will you cap attendance at the level determined by question 1? Will you add additional liturgies, or move to a larger space, like a parish hall? Will you divide worship services, perhaps asking people with names that start with A-K to attend at one time and L-Z another? Will you invite people to signal that they plan to attend in-person worship? Who will keep a count of those in worship, and how you will ask those attending after the capacity is reached to wait until a later service?
3. How will you limit the number of people serving in worship (such as lectors, acolytes, multiple clergy, etc.), so that more people may be able to attend in the congregation?

4. How will you ensure that people serving in worship (such as lectors, acolytes, multiple clergy, etc.) are not carriers of the COVID-19 virus? Will you require testing for COVID-19 and/or for antibodies to the virus?
5. How will you encourage people to enter and exit worship services while maintaining social distancing? Will or how will you be congregating after worship services and at other times? If offering outdoor worship or fellowship, how will you ensure safety which is equal to or greater than in indoor spaces?
5. How will greeters/ushers help to monitor adherence to attendance and other guidelines? How will they also model masking and physical distance?
6. How will you ensure cleanliness and sanitation in regard to the following items and spaces: worship leaflets/bulletins, prayer books, hymnals; physical items such as the altar, pulpit, lectern, kneelers, communion rail; areas where smaller groups gather during the week, such as for Sunday School, Bible studies, church office activities, playgrounds?
7. How will you provide for the safety and care of sextons and/or other persons who are cleaning our worship and/or gathering spaces? How might job descriptions and/or employment practices need to be adapted for the ministries of our congregations in our current context?
8. How will you ensure the sanitization and safety practices of the following people and activities: altar guild, nursery workers, greeters, ushers, acolytes, choir members, money counters, seniors and at-risk people?

PHASE II GUIDELINES

1. Congregations will be strongly encouraged to wear medical or fabric non-medical face masks while entering, leaving, and attending church services in order to reduce the risk of asymptomatic spread. Remember, a face mask does not primarily provide protection for the wearer; it significantly reduces the risk of spread to others. It is an outward, visible sign of love of our neighbor.
2. Family units may sit together, but there must be separation between different family units or individuals of at least 6 feet, and every other pew must be left completely empty.
3. It is recommended that Communion will be distributed in one kind only: bread - in the form of wafers. Bread must be distributed in a touch-free manner (dropping, not placing the wafer into the recipient's hands). With appropriate safety precautions and with the bishop's approval of those precautions, Communion may be distributed in both kinds - bread and wine. Wine may not be distributed from a common cup.
4. The Peace must be exchanged in a completely touch-free manner, perhaps by bowing or waving while remaining in place. Elbow bumps and other reduced-contact forms of exchanging the peace are discouraged because physical distance of a minimum of six feet is not maintained.

5. Refrain from passing offering plates. In advance of worship, set the expectation of online giving or mailing in checks. You can also designate a location where offerings may be placed before or during worship.
6. We still need to provide worshippers with printed materials and to make newcomers feel welcome. Have a greeter/usher, standing six feet away, staff a welcome table with the needed bulletins/materials available for pick-up. To avoid people touching door handles/knobs, keep the church doors open before worship. Consider using handouts that can be taken home after worship or recycled, but not re-used. Consider using a full-text bulletin, and consider removing all prayer books, hymnals, pencils, etc. from every pew. If possible, consider providing masks and hand sanitizer for guests who may not know and/or have the resources to follow congregational norms.
7. Research shows that singing and preaching which result in a high level of aspiration may result in droplets that spread up to 25 feet. During this transition, forego having an in-person choir and use soloists that are physically removed from the congregation. For safety when preaching, consider pre-recording the sermon and showing it on a screen or place a plexiglass barrier between the preacher and congregation. If you're continuing live streaming, make sure your music is in the public domain or that you have obtained a proper license.
8. Due to the impossibility of getting children and infants to maintain appropriate distance in this setting, a nursery is not advised during Phase II. You will need to advise parents and guardians in advance.
9. Consider a coffee hour that does not include serving any food or beverages but does include appropriate social distancing. Consider eliminating pot-luck meals, etc., during Phase II. Even when your congregation returns to in-person worship, you may still want to hold services, meetings, Christian formation and/or social gatherings online until it is safe for everyone, including those who are elderly and/or who have compromised immune systems to fully participate in worship.
10. Consider ways to correct unsafe practices. Some parishioners will stand too close to others, offer a hand to shake, or a hug. It is going to happen. Teach everyone the safe practices you intend to keep, in advance. Remind your congregation that each person is responsible for themselves. Give parishioners and/or vestry persons who have the gift of offering a gracious word the task of guiding those who struggle to change their behavior. Consider that some parishioners may need to be gently encouraged to stay home a little longer.
11. Each congregation should find a way to track and notify those who have attended services in the event that someone becomes sick. A jar of pencils could be placed on a table with the bulletins, and parishioners could sign a pad as they come through the door. Used pencils would be placed in a separate receptacle and cleaned after the service. In a small congregation, and with the expressed permission of those in attendance, an usher could take a picture of the nave after the service begins.

CONCLUSION

Whenever we read of historical events - whether the challenging events of recent centuries such as wars and plagues, or the events of our salvation history in Holy Scripture - we are reading with the advantage of knowing the outcome of the story. The faithful characters in the story did not know the outcome. We are in that place today. It is a moment of faith, hope, and most of all, love.

I would like to conclude with a prayer written by Thomas Merton.

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone." Amen.

THE RIGHT REVEREND J. SCOTT MAYER

BISHOP PROVISIONAL, EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF FORT WORTH