Wednesday, May 20, 2020

*Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.*

*(Mt. 11: 28)*

Dear Friends,

Grace and peace be with you as we begin the transition from Easter season into Pentecost. I pray that the birthday of the Church fills you with God’s Spirit and blessing! I also pray that your Pentecost experience brings you the comfort and refreshment promised by our Lord.

Our current reality is calling us to experience new ways to worship and be a community of believers. Together, we have discovered creative and amazing expressions of worship – a worship and fellowship that relied upon technology and virtual community. In most cases, it worked well and in other cases not so well. We learned and adapted and at all times did our best. Through it all, we remain the Body of Christ.

The SARS-COV2 virus remains an ever-present reality. My heart breaks for all who battle COVID-19 as well as those who succumbed to this disease. Our prayers should continue to be with the many Americans concerned for their jobs and others who struggle to keep their businesses afloat.

Throughout Easter season we read from the Acts of the Apostles. These stories about the first generation of Christians are beautiful examples of faith in action. They adapted to a new reality and built the Church. Attached to this letter are guidelines and directives to assist us as we, slowly and safely, resume worship. On the next page you will find an explanation of protocol for the initial resumption of worship.

At this moment of profound challenge, I am aware of the grief we share. Grief for the loss of a familiar worship experience that filled our hearts and souls in amazing and mysterious ways. I hope that this communication will begin our slow and sensible attempt to be together, again, as a worshipping community. As a Pentecost beckons, please know that the Spirit of God will rest upon us and guide our efforts.

Peace be with you,

+Brian

BRS:pj
Resuming Worship in the Diocese of Mississippi

Overview

The resumption of public worship will begin slowly, carefully and incrementally. Everyone should be aware that COVID-19 remains a serious threat to public health. Therefore, it may be necessary to “pull back” and suspend worship again. At his May 19 press conference, Governor Tate Reeves suggested Guidelines for Faith Communities in Mississippi. At that time, he asked communities of Faith to carefully begin worship. Our Diocesan leadership joins Governor Reeves in recommending that anyone who is part of a vulnerable population should refrain from public worship in order to mitigate the potential contraction of COVID-19. The resumption of worship may begin as listed below.

Please know these are suggestions, not directives, for your next steps. You are not required to resume public worship on the dates listed below. Attendance thresholds must not be exceeded.

All Churches
(Effective September 1, 2020) may increase indoor and outdoor attendance. No congregation may deviate from 6-feet social distancing in all directions and may not exceed 50% of maximum capacity.

All Churches
• An online or telephone sign-up system must be utilized. A sign-up system will impress upon everyone the importance of maintaining the attendance thresholds.
• Masks must be used.
• Communion will be in one kind. No small cups, just the Body of our Lord.
• Services may be added including a Saturday Vigil if desired.
• Leadership is required to submit a plan to the Bishop’s office for the resumption of services. Click this link for easy submission of your plan. https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/TKL9X75
• Mark the pews or seats accordingly.
• Mark communion stations.
• Maintain an online service if possible!
Because we seek to ensure the health and safety of all those whose lives we touch as we live into our call to be a sign of God’s love in Jesus Christ for the world, our public worship (and other gatherings) necessarily will resume incrementally. To that end, our resumption of worship and other activities may sometimes lag behind the phased reopening of businesses, public gathering spaces, and other faith communities within Mississippi. Additionally, our progression toward full reopening may be halted at any time due to increased risk of COVID-19.

As we progress through incremental stages for reopening face-to-face worship and gatherings, Bishop Seage and other advisors, including state and local agencies, will continue to monitor statistics and pertinent data to guide decision making. Once sufficient benchmarks have been met, Bishop Seage will notify parish leadership.

As you make plans to reopen, clergy and vestries should become familiar with the guidance on mitigation of COVID-19 published by the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC):

Please clean and sanitize your space both prior to reopening and regularly after reopening following the CDC’s recommendations:

Additionally, parish leadership should be aware of and follow the "Safe Worship" guidelines issued by Governor Reeves: https://htv-prod-media.s3.amazonaws.com/files/safe-worship-guidelines-1589917466.pdf, and should stay abreast of updates at https://www.coronavirus.ms.gov. As the risk of the novel coronavirus is not consistent statewide, parishes should also follow the guidelines for social gatherings set out by your city and county governments.

Lastly, as each of our worshipping communities is unique well beyond geographic location, no “one-size-fits-all” approach for returning to pre-COVID-19 practices exists. What follows, then, are base-line guidelines for initial regathering that may be relaxed over time, by the bishop, as the risk of COVID-19 decreases. Bishop Seage will continue to offer guidance as to when the various mitigation practices outlined below may cease.
Best Practices for Reopening

**Vulnerable Populations:** It is imperative to advise that anyone belonging to a vulnerable population as defined by the CDC ([https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/index.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/index.html)) should stay home. Clergy who fall within these categories are encouraged to continue virtual offerings.

**Virtual Offerings:** Continue live-stream and pre-recorded worship and formation opportunities for the benefit of those at high-risk of contracting COVID-19.

**Attendance:** Clergy who feel sick should stay home, and it is imperative to advise parishioners that anyone who feels sick should stay home. Also communicate that anyone who tests positive for COVID-19 after attending a service should immediately contact the rector/vicar so that all others in attendance may be notified to self-quarantine. **For this reason, attendance should be taken for any service or gathering.**

**Sunday Offerings:** To limit the number of people in buildings, only worship services should be offered on Sunday mornings at this time.

**Physical Distancing:** Create seating to maintain six feet of distance between those who do not live in the same household. (Distancing may require moving worship to a parish hall, outdoors, or an off-campus venue, or offering additional liturgies.)

**Hand Hygiene:**

- Provide hand sanitizer for all in easily accessible locations.
- Use no-touch alternatives for passing the peace and collecting the offering.
- Remove BCPs, hymnals, visitor cards, pens, etc. from pew racks. Placing full-text bulletins in seats prior to services or encouraging the use of personal copies of BCPs is preferable to having ushers/greeters distribute printed materials or having parishioners pick up materials from a common source.

**Face Coverings:** Those older than two years of age should wear face coverings ([https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cloth-face-cover-faq.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cloth-face-cover-faq.html)). Plan to provide masks to those who arrive without them.

**Singing:** Because singing easily spreads droplets/aerosols that can carry the coronavirus, congregational as well as choral singing is discouraged, although up to four singers may be used if space allows and social distancing can be guaranteed. Singers should avoid facing one another or the congregation (see **Appendix I: Singing**). 

**Morning Prayer:** Morning Prayer remains an acceptable means of Sunday morning worship.
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**Holy Eucharist:** If parishes elect to offer Holy Eucharist, a number of adjustments may be required, since touch is a primary vector for the spread of the virus:

- The presider should sanitize his/her hands both before the Eucharistic Prayer and before administering communion.
- The Sacrament should be administered in one kind (bread) only. Note that wafers are preferable to homemade bread.
- Distribution of the host must be done in stations to maintain physical distance among communicants.
- If multiple services are necessary for a full congregation to receive communion, Communion Under Special Circumstances (BCP, p. 396) is recommended for later gatherings.
- Bread should be covered during the Eucharistic Prayer.

**Fellowship/Coffee Hour:** Fellowship gatherings should be suspended until further notice.

**Adult Formation:** Virtual opportunities should continue, although in-person opportunities are highly discouraged. Special requests may be allowed with permission from Bishop Seage. You may request special permission on question #16 at this link:
https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/TKL9X75

**Activities with Children and Youth:** Because much is unknown regarding the virus's effects on/spread through children, in-person opportunities with small children and nurseries should remain closed/suspended. Opportunities with older youth are highly discouraged; however, special requests may be allowed with permission from Bishop Seage. You may request special permission on question #16 at this link: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/TKL9X75

**Vacation Bible School:** In-person VBS should not be offered for summer 2020.

**Weddings:** Marriage services should follow physical distancing and other mitigation practices above.

**Funerals:** Burial services should follow physical distancing and other mitigation practices above.

**Baptisms:** Baptisms during Sunday worship should follow physical distancing and other mitigation practices above. Baptisms may take place outside the context of Sunday worship at this time, although services should take place at the church. The baptismal font should be carefully sanitized after every baptism and remain empty between baptismal services.

**Outreach:** Outreach activities should follow physical distancing and other mitigation practices above (see **Appendix II: Outreach**).
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Reopening Questions for Consideration

Your Community:

- What percentage of your congregation falls within a high-risk category identified by the CDC? (For a list of those most vulnerable, visit https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-at-higher-risk.html.)
- How will you advise those in vulnerable groups to remain home?
- Do you have an understanding of whether/how many parishioners are comfortable returning when you reopen?
- How will you continue to reach out to those who do not feel safe returning?
- What are the trends in COVID-19 cases in your county over the previous few weeks? Do you have a contact person within your local government in order to stay informed about changes in city/county guidelines?
- How will you address members of your congregation who do not adhere to reopening guidelines?
- Do you have a plan in place for contacting parishioners in the instance of an attendee testing positive following a worship service or other church gathering?

Mitigation:

- Have you posted signage regarding expectations around mitigation practices?
- Have you assessed each area of your space to determine capacity given physical distancing guidelines?
- How will you limit the number of attendees to maintain distancing guidelines?
- How will you instruct people to enter and exit your building to maintain distance?
- Do you have hand sanitizer available in highly trafficked areas? Is it accessible so that users can maintain physical distance?
- Do you have adequate supplies of soap and disposable towels in bathrooms?
- Do you have gloves for those who need them (e.g., offertory counters, altar guild, cleaning staff)?
- Do you have masks available for people who arrive without their own?
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- If using reusable masks, do you have a plan for storing and laundering?
- Do you have adequate cleaning supplies? See the Environmental Protection Agency’s list of products effective against the novel coronavirus: https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2
- Does your cleaning schedule/protocol need to change? Note: Common areas and bathrooms need to be cleaned after each worship service.

Worship:
- Will you need to rotate service locations and/or times to allow for cleaning between services?
- Will you use full-text bulletins, project slides, or encourage people to bring their own prayer books or electronic devices on which they can access bulletins?
- How will you clean/sanitize or otherwise limit the use of frequently touched surfaces?
- How will the duties of ushers/greeters change (e.g., distributing bulletins, welcoming, counting attendees, collecting offering)?
- How will the duties of the altar guild change?
- What changes need to be made regarding processions to ensure physical distance?
- What changes need to be made regarding the altar party ensure physical distance?
- How will you instruct people to exchange the peace?
- How will your offertory and procedures for counting collections change?
- How will you clean the church between services?
- Is additional equipment needed for providing virtual worship for those who continue to shelter in place?
- How will you teach children in developmentally appropriate ways about new procedures in church?

Sources Consulted

The Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe
Offers clear guidelines and a very helpful list of questions to help parishes consider their particular circumstances and prepare necessary documents for reopening.
http://ecf450cdbeb67eb7b8c-db8c75cfc72b416e3c18df97c8a1dcaa.r54.cf2.rackcdn.com/-uploaded/r/0e10242671_1587734068_regatheringplans23iv20.pdf

The Episcopal Diocese of Colorado
Takes a subjective approach, describing a movement from a “volatile, uncertain, complex and
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ambiguous” world to a place of “vision, understanding, clarity and agility.” Offers helpful language for writing rationale for decisions as well as a final phase described as “Applying what we have learned and preparing for the future,” indicative of the forward-looking perspective of this document in general.

https://episcopalcolorado.org/connected-in-common/

The Episcopal Diocese of Georgia
Calls for the restoration of in-person worship by regions and is helpful in its objectivity and clarity.

http://georgia.anglican.org/docs/ReturningtoInPersonWorship.pdf

The Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina
Provides well-documented, detailed, and practical information about: (1) preparing the church building itself for reopening, including how to map space to respect distancing guidelines; (2) insuring proper use of masks; (3) effectively using hand sanitizer; (3) screening, monitoring, and tracking within a congregation; and (4) respecting pastoral concerns involved in teaching, testing, tracking, treatment, and confidentiality.


The Episcopal Dioceses of Maryland, Washington, and Virginia
The document’s title, “Turning toward the Future with Caution and Hope,” serves as a good summary. Offers a thoughtful introduction to the challenges the church faces, and gives concise, clear guidelines, presented in phases paired with public health indicators.

http://www.thediocese.net/Customer-Content/www/CMS/files/MWVA_Statement_6_0.pdf

The Episcopal Diocese of Olympia
Lengthy and detailed, contains easily understood charts, an excellent list of reopening questions/actions, and an extensive bibliography. Also includes a thoughtful guide specifically for funerals, graveside services, and weddings.


Thomistic Institute
Constantly updated and compiled by infectious disease experts, medical professionals, scientists, and Roman Catholic theologians, with guidance from the World Health Organization and the CDC. Offers extensive guidance on the Mass, Confession, and Anointing, with Baptismal guidelines to be released soon.

https://thomisticinstitute.org/covid-sacraments
Appendix I – Singing

Singing as a Risk for Coronavirus Transmission:
A Report to the Diocese of Mississippi Music Commission

By Stephen Stray, PhD

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS CoV2) and the associated condition Coronavirus disease-19 (COVID-19), were first reported in the city of Wuhan, Hebei Province, the People’s Republic of China, in December 2019, and have since spread worldwide. COVID-19 is characterized by influenza-like illness, including persistent dry cough and fever. Symptoms can range from none/very mild to severe. The disease can lead to death, typically due to Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome, often in older patients with one or more underlying conditions such as obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and other conditions, but fatalities have also been observed in younger people, including children.

SARS CoV2 is spread via respiratory droplets, possibly including aerosols, and by fomites (particles deposited on surfaces and transmitted by touch). Pre-symptomatic transmission, the spread of virus by people before they show overt recognizable symptoms, has been documented both in the general population (Wei et al., 2020) and in an elderly population where asymptomatic transmission (spread by people who never develop symptoms) appears also to have occurred (Kimball et al., 2020).

Recent publications have implicated worship (Yong et al., 2020) and organized choral singing (Hamner et al., 2020). In both cases, singing seems to have been a risk factor associated with transmission. Hamner et al. report that patients who attended a choir practice where the putative index case was asymptomatic were infected, although the risk was higher for attendees at a second choir practice where the putative index case showed mild symptoms. In both cases, the exposure was prolonged (2.5 hours) and social distancing was not practiced, with chairs being placed 6-8 inches apart. However, unlike a recent study of a call center in South Korea, (Park et al., 2020) where transmission was primarily in clusters suggesting transmission was primarily short-range and required prolonged interaction, 87% of choir members attending one or both choir practices (53/85) developed COVID-19 symptoms and tested positive, including one person who attended only the earlier choir practice. Analysis of seating charts did not apparently indicate that those closest to either the putative index case or secondary cases were at higher risk, although other activities including socialization and partaking of communal snacks may also have contributed to transmission.

Although particle dispersion due to singing has not been studied specifically since the 1960’s (Loudon & Roberts, 1968), data produced at that time suggest that the kinds of particles
produced by singing are very similar to those produced by coughing, and remain airborne much longer than those produced by regular talking (36% still airborne after 30 minutes for singing, compared to 6.4% for talking). More recent studies suggest that these particles are dispersed farther (up to 8 meters, i.e., 25 feet) and remain viable longer than previously thought (Bourouiba L, 2020). Perhaps unsurprisingly, another recent study showed the increase in efficiency of aerosol emission with increasing loudness (Asadi et al., 2019).

Given these findings, the prospect for returning to communal public singing until large scale immunity is present in the population, either due to an effective vaccine or widespread natural immunity, must be minimal due to the risk imposed by the production of aerosols. It should be noted that most cloth masks (including surgical masks) do not eliminate the production of aerosols, although they are very effective in retarding droplet emissions. It would seem reasonable that small groups of people in well ventilated areas wearing masks could quietly speak the words or hum the tunes to songs and hymns without undue risk, although I am not aware of specific studies that have addressed this. Any gathering should follow good practices: people who have even mild symptoms or who have reason to suspect they may have been exposed to the virus should stay home, and all participants should practice good hand and cough/sneeze hygiene and wear masks at all times. Attendance by people at higher risk of severe disease (older age, underlying conditions such as obesity, diabetes, respiratory and cardiovascular disease) should be discouraged. Attendance logs should be kept for the purposes of contact tracing, and temperatures should be taken by a reliable method where practical.

If small groups of singers must gather, e.g., to record service music for later broadcast, they should only do so in a large and well ventilated space or outdoors. They should be appropriately spaced (6 feet apart, per CDC recommendations) and all face in the same direction, away from other participants. Others required to attend (accompanists, sound recordists) should wear masks. Sessions should be kept to the minimum time possible, and only those directly participating should be present, especially if the session is to take place indoors. Indoor spaces should be vacated and thoroughly “aired out” prior to other use.

Please remember that this is an evolving situation, and everyone should be sensitive to local conditions: if there is widespread local transmission, face-to-face meetings of any kind should be avoided, especially by people at higher risk. Finally, remember that the Lord hears the praises in your heart as well as those on your lips.

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Appendix II – Outreach

Notes on Outreach

By The Rev. Beth Foose, Grace Church, Canton

When Jesus was asked, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” He replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Matthew 22:36-40

During this time of coronavirus, we are all trying to sort out what it looks like to love God. We are asking all sorts of questions: When can we return to face-to-face worship? What might worship look like? Will we sing? How many of us can gather? How will we share communion? How will we do youth gatherings…bible study…Sunday school? These are all certainly important considerations.

But I think it is also important to remember that loving our neighbor is not an add-on option to what it means to be the church. It wasn’t an afterthought in Jesus’ ministry, and it really shouldn’t be in ours either. Loving our neighbor is essential to who we are called to be as the body of Christ.

I have some ideas about what loving our neighbors might look like under the shadow of COVID-19, and I am certainly willing to meet with individual parishes that are interested in considering how to continue their outreach ministries and sort out the logistics of making that happen.

• Of course it is important to encourage our congregations to practice social distancing and remain safe. At the same time, I believe we have a responsibility to raise the question of privilege. COVID-19 has laid bare many of the inequities and injustices that have come to pass as “normal” in our culture. We can help our congregations to notice those inequities and to wonder what Jesus might say about them, or where Jesus might be in the midst of them. Might Jesus be the undocumented immigrant who is deemed both “illegal” and “essential”? Might Jesus be carrying out groceries at the grocery store or mopping the brow of a patient on a ventilator or standing in a food pantry line? It is important to remember that having choices about our safety is oftentimes a matter of privilege. Many essential workers are living at or barely above the poverty level. They don’t have the option of “working from home.” Those of us who can choose safety have a responsibility to work to make others safe. If you shop or go into an office where employees are not
given adequate protection, say something to the management. Break the silence of negligence. As consumers we have power that employees might not. At Grace Church we have made over 1,200 face masks that have gone to marginalized communities. We shared them at our food pantry distributions, in weekend bags of food for children that we passed out in a low-income housing project, and at Hispanic grocery stores in town. Everyone is scared, and handing someone a face mask offers comfort as well as giving them agency to choose to protect themselves and others.

- Encourage congregants to thank essential workers and to pray for them. We sent an email with a prayer for people to print at home and pass along to the essential workers they encounter to let them know that we care and we notice the sacrifices they are making.

- There are CDC-approved ways to continue food distribution to marginalized populations. At Grace Church, we have moved our distribution outdoors. We pack the bags the day before (three volunteers in a large room). Clients drive up, open their car doors, and we put the food in their cars. (Initially, I was the only person outside giving out food. The second month, the senior warden insisted on helping me, so last month the two of us worked together — masked and gloved.) We have also given away food to Hispanic children by leaving it on their doorsteps. People are hungry, even during a pandemic, and our obligation to feed them persists beyond our convenience and comfort.

- Encourage congregants to wear face masks whenever they are in public. It is an act of solidarity. We can’t know for certain whether or not we are contagious. Nor can we know who among us might be immunocompromised or at high-risk for complications from the virus. We have a moral obligation to try to keep others safe as well as ourselves.

- Encourage people to support local businesses and local farmers. Most local businesses operate with a very small margin, especially grocery stores. They need our business now more than ever. (And they are generally less crowded and therefore safer than larger chains.)

- Encourage people to continue to support the non-profits they have been supporting — we still need good music, good art, and good journalism.

- When you are shopping, please don’t buy WIC or SNAP approved items if you can afford to do otherwise. Families on WIC or SNAP don’t have the same options other families do. We should shop for the common good, not just our own. We are called to be stewards of creation. We shouldn’t buy more than we need. Hoarding hurts everybody.

- Stay home as much as possible. Right now, social distancing is one way to love our neighbor.

- Call and check in on neighbors. If you’re going to the store, check to see if they need anything. One person going to the store is better than two.

- Send cards and notes. Let people know you are thinking about them.