

Dear Parishioners,

The Vestry and I met this last Monday and discussed at length a possible opening to in-person services beginning in September, and what that might look like:

- Reservations required
- No more than 30 in church (including clergy, organist, and people taking part in the service)
- 6 foot distancing between households at all times
- No gathering with friends before or after services
- Masks mandatory: covering both nose and mouth
- No cushions or books—we will be using disposable bulletins
- No singing
- No communion at the altar
- Ushers seating people while others wait
- No shaking hands at the door
- Sitting where ushers seat you rather than choosing seats-----

One thing was clear—it would feel quite different from the services pre-pandemic.

Before coming to a decision, the Vestry and I did some reading. We read recent articles by medical professionals and studied Ohio Gov. DeWine's August 4th article and chart concerning a small gathering at a church in his state that resulted in 94 people contracting Covid-19. The carrier had been asymptomatic and didn't realize he was putting other people's health at risk. We also discussed the possible ramifications of our schools opening soon based on other states' experience: the possibility of many children and adults testing positive for Covid-19 shortly after reopening.

After much conversation and thought, it was telling that no one on the Task Force and only one member of the Vestry *would be willing to resume coming to services in the church if we reopened in September*. Each person acknowledged that they—or a loved one in their immediate family-- didn't yet feel it was safe enough to return to in-person services. While we all acknowledged the strong desire for some in our community to resume regular in-person worship, ultimately everyone agreed in church worship was still not in the community's best interest.

So, the Vestry came to a decision, and it wasn't done easily: they voted unanimously to keep the church closed to in-person services for September and October. They felt, and I agreed, that the continued safety of our parishioners was their primary consideration.

We also enumerated the things we have *accomplished*: we have gotten such enormous positive feedback from our service videos that we feel we have a working model for worship for the moment. What we have now is a thoughtful, prayerful Sunday service with many people participating, and we have plans to develop it further in the future. We continue to reach many people during the week with Noonday Prayer and Compline.

The Vestry and I are keenly aware that we still want to see each other—and not just online. We all miss worshiping together in the church—but I think that what we miss *most* is being together. We are a community and we miss each other. The Vestry and I were determined to come up with a way to be together again.

So-- we are working on finding a venue to hold an outdoor service, once in September and once in October. Most Episcopal churches that are worshiping in-person in Maine are meeting outside. We will do the same. It

is *far safer for everyone to be outdoors*, physically distanced and masked, than indoors in a church with limited ventilation.

When we find a place to worship outside, we will ask you to bring a lawn chair or folding chair for yourself. We will celebrate a *Picnic Eucharist*—everyone bringing their own wine or juice and bread or crackers. I will consecrate everything at once, allowing people to eat and drink in place.

It will be an opportunity to see each other, interact with appropriate distancing and masking, and be the community in person that we've tried to be online. The Vestry is looking forward to it, and so am I. I hope you are, too.

So much has changed in our community—deaths, illnesses, anxiety, loneliness—but so much has remained the same: your love for one another, your caring for the needs of others and, most of all, your resilience in the face of the unknown. We are all called to trust God and hold very tight to his love and guidance until the anguish of distancing is gone and we are called back into community again—in person.

It may seem like it will be forever till then, but I think—I hope—I PRAY, that it's not long now. And outdoor worship will be our newest adventure.

God is with us. Keep the faith.

And let us remember that life is short, and we don't have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. So, let's be swift to love and make haste to be kind. And let's do it together.

Bless you all.

Lisa+