

Episcopal Diocese of Maine
Outdoor Worship Working Group

Preliminary Report

May 22, 2020

O Almighty and merciful God, with whom are the issues of life and death: Grant us, we beseech thee, held and deliverance in this time of grievous sickness and mortality, and sanctify to us this affliction, that in our sore distress we may turn our hearts unto thee; though Jesus Christ our Lord.
AMEN

From the 1929 Scottish Book of Common Prayer

Our current knowledge of the COVID-19 virus, in particular how it is transmitted, is limited and constantly evolves. Our limited understanding of this virus is exacerbated by our current cultural environment which has inserted an ideological component into public health policy and personal decision making. This means that it is very difficult to know if it is safe to re-gather for public worship at this time, and has made these decisions potentially controversial if not divisive.

The situation in Maine is further complicated by geographical and demographic variations across this great state. The situation in counties with high infection rates will necessarily lead to different processes and possibly different conclusions than a county with very few cases. This is further complicated by the fact that some counties with low incidences of COVID-19 are currently welcoming summer residents returning from all across the country. There is a real possibility that cases may increase with their arrival. The ongoing relaxation of shelter-in-place guidelines may result in additional cases as well.

This dearth of reliable information, the diversity of contexts across the Diocese, and the dynamic situation we are all in has led this committee to conclude that we cannot, with confidence or authority, make recommendations about what congregations in Maine should do about re-gathering for outdoor worship. While experts agree that gathering outside is safer, indoor gatherings (with precautions taken) still meet state guidelines and may incur risk that is still acceptable for many.”

This leaves leaders of congregations in the difficult position of having to make critical decisions with very imperfect information. Like St. Paul preached at the Areopagus, we too are “groping” in the dark for wisdom regarding regathering.

What follows are factors to consider, are questions that should be asked, and are glimpses into the processes that some congregations in the diocese are using. Attached are several resources to help inform your decision processes.

- **General considerations**
 - Ask yourselves: How many cases of COVID-19 you are willing to risk in order to regather?
 - How will you deal with the ramifications of an outbreak...
 - Within your congregation?
 - In the wider community as a result of regathering?
 - A question to ask: Is this summer a small window for us to worship in person with the potential for a Fall resurgence of infections and following reclosing of society?
 - Consider treating regathering as a Special Occasion and not a return to regular Sunday Morning worship
 - Plan on continuing online worship offerings regardless of regathering plans as many will not attend in-person worship (nor should they). Consider that in person worship need not be live streamed, but can be created and streamed at other times.

- **Process**
 - Consider creating a COVID response committee, or tasking a portion of the Vestry or Bishop's Committee to address issues.
 - Consider multiple groups, each handling different aspects of your response:
 - In-person Worship
 - Communications/Technology/Streamed Worship
 - Building
 - Outreach (remember the coming needs, spiritually and temporally are going to be massive)
 - Informing the congregation
 - Ensuring that everyone understands the ground rules for services is critical.
 - Some churches will include an agreement that goes with their reservation software, meaning your reservation is your consent to the rules, i.e. masks, social distancing...
 - Some churches will mail the rules to every member.
 - Liability/Waivers
 - Church Insurance has published no specific recommendations about liability or asking people to sign liability waivers, though that is something to consider.

- **Physical Space**
 - Location for outdoor worship
 - Parking lot:
 - Easier surface to navigate
 - Harder to erect tent (if lot is paved)
 - Will you have sufficient parking?
 - Lawns/Memorial Gardens:
 - Is it safe for everyone to transit?
 - Coordinate with lawn mowers if a tent is to be erected.

- Do you need a Foul Weather Plan?
- About those Black Flies, Deer Ticks and Mosquitos...
- To tent or not to tent?
 - Tents provide shelter for us, and perhaps for the virus as well. A tent may inhibit some of the dispersal of virus and will shade the virus from sunlight, which helps the virus.
 - If a tent is used, sidewalls should not be installed.
 - Consider security of tents/outdoor furniture? Will there be mid-week traffic?
 - Ensure tents are erected by professionals. Rental companies are desperate for work and have been found to be available for hire to set up/take down tents.
- Sound Systems
 - Outdoor-of-doors and masks will make projection more difficult.
 - Lavalier mics at the throat may work better than headsets, podium mounted or handheld microphones.
- Flooring
 - At least one church will lay an outdoor floor to make navigating the space easier.
- Capacity
 - Distancing
 - The Standard is 6'. It is unclear if 6' is sufficient if everyone is sitting still for extended times. Some parishes will be enforcing 10'.
 - Reservations – SignUpGenius, Signup.com, Eventbrite, Church management software such as Realm.
 - Newcomers may (God willing) come to church. That may push you over capacity. One idea is to have some number of members on stand-by to leave if newcomers arrive. Evangelism by vacancy!
- Bathrooms.
 - Bathrooms are potentially a place of transmission.
 - Decide whether to open them at all or not, or have them opened by key for emergencies only. (Access to the building triggers many cleaning issues, not just in bathroom spaces).
 - Maintaining bathrooms
 - Ideas include sanitizing between uses, cleaning every 15 minutes.
- Chairs – BYOC or church chairs?
 - Most have concluded that bringing your own chair is the safest bet (with some church provided chairs for those without them, those unable to navigate with chairs, or newcomers).

- One church is concerned with congregants carrying chairs themselves and will be using church chairs with a rigorous cleaning protocol.
 - Traffic Flow of people
 - How will you manage flow of people in and out of worship area?
 - How do you discourage after-church socializing (Parking Lot conversations could be hazardous than usual).
- **Conduct of Worship**
 - Which Rite?
 - Morning Prayer?
 - Spiritual Communion?
 - Eucharist in One-kind
 - Creative Eucharist Options
 - Eucharistic Picnic
 - Congregational Style Communion trays (individual cups of wine)
 - One parish is considering consecrating at a very small (10 person) in-person Mass and then distributing broadly to the congregation as we do homebound Eucharistic visiting.
 - House Church: Small groups (bubbles) of people participating in Mass via livestream at home
 - Non-Sunday worship opportunities, perhaps several of them at different times in the week.
 - Length of Service
 - Consider a shorter service to limit exposure time.
 - Orders of Service
 - Most will ask people to bring their own BCP or use an app (currently free from Church Publishing).
 - Some will provide bulletins with the entire service included. They will be stacked for pick up, not handed out individually. Congregants will be asked to recycle them at home.
 - Music
 - Even outside, congregational singing is likely unsafe.
 - Consider humming along to hymns rather than singing.
 - Consider remote mikes to amplify musicians playing in the church.
 - Consider pre-recorded music
 - Other considerations
 - There is some debate about celebrants/servers/lectors wearing masks. Most think it is prudent, and models mask wearing as normative.
 - Removing masks for the Eucharistic Prayer or for reading defeats the purpose of the mask as public, projected speaking likely spreads

aerosol droplets more widely than conversational speech or breathing.

- Gloves?
 - Altar parties should visibly sanitize hands before handling items on the altar.
 - Consider wearing gloves. Some churches are procuring white cotton gloves for a less clinical aesthetic to the Mass (and there are indications that the virus is transmitted less via porous surfaces than smooth ones such as latex or nitrile).
 - Ensure appropriate distance between servers.
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- **Volunteer and staff roles**
 - Clear communication of responsibilities is critical so that safety protocols are maintained, that staff/volunteers feel (and are) supported, and that everyone stays safe.
 - Role of ushers – Ushers are very important
 - Enforcing social distance rules/traffic flow
 - Enforcing mask wearing
 - Safely distributing Bulletins (if any) – likely from a static position, not handed person to person
 - Recording who is in attendance (for contact tracing purposes in case there is exposure)
 - Masks.
 - Outside, with proper distancing, masks are not required. However, it is unclear how sitting statically for an hour effects the outdoor-social distance equation.
 - Plan for how to handle someone who refuses to wear a mask.
 - One congregation plans to begin services only once everyone is masked
 - Masks should be provided for anyone who arrives without one.
 - Eucharistic Ministers
 - Should be limited numbers
 - Rehearsals should be conducted to ensure smooth, socially distanced conduct of worship

Selected Resources

On not knowing: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/22/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-prediction-future.html>

Episcopal diocese of Maine “An Initial Approach to Regathering”:
<https://files.constantcontact.com/e8ac573a001/1a9aeee8-f8cb-4cae-bfdb-aec9becb10af.pdf>

Episcopal Diocese of Maine “Resources for Home and Online Worship”:
<https://www.episcopalmaine.org/benefits-hidden/live-stream-services>

Distancing Guidelines for Churches from the Fire Marshall of Louisiana: Distancing guidelines --
Louisiana <http://media.graytvinc.com/documents/Outdoor+Religious+Services.pdf>

How do we gather safely? Excellent check list from Massachusetts Public Health
http://www.mma.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Places-of-Worship_Circular-Checklist_Eng.pdf