

5-28-2020

Dear People of St. Matthew,

Since on Monday we completed our eleventh week of embracing a fully virtual format, I think it is time to reflect on what it is we are doing and where we are going, especially with rhetoric in the media regarding the so-called reopening of businesses and the use of the word “essential” as it pertains to the Church. Without a doubt, stay home orders and social distancing is hard. Not only does it fully disrupt all facets of life that are necessary and enjoyable, the economic and psychological impacts cut deeply for many of us and some will find them impossible to overcome once restrictions are lifted. However, it is important to remember why we are here to begin with and what our appropriate response is as the Church.

This week, we marked a sobering statistic: over 350,000 people, including 100,000 Americans, have died due to COVID-19 in four months. This week’s Sunday New York Times, rightly reminded us that the “statistics” are really people, each of whom had lives. These are people who laughed and cried, who served their families and communities, who had jobs and hobbies, who had successes and failures. These people are us. Since the Church is fundamentally in the people business, the Church has a particular mission to care for people: all people. Why? Because we are witnesses to a God that fundamentally cares about people: all people. For this reason, on March 10th (a full three days before the national emergency declaration, a full thirteen days before our own state’s “stay at home” orders, and well before any other Episcopal parish in our country) we very intentionally moved to an all-virtual format. We did this because we believed the biological evidence at the time of how the virus was operating and took immediate action to protect the people we value, which means everybody. The State did not close our building. We did. Because of this, the parish is very much still open and our work continues and our people are alive.

This leads then to the second point regarding the word “essential” as it pertains to the Church. Ironically, last Thursday we celebrated the Feast of the Ascension: the feast when God alone deems the Church and its workers to be “essential”. Without Jesus physically in the world to do the work of God, it is fundamentally left to his followers to be the hands, heart, and feet of Jesus in this world. Indeed the Church has been and continues to be essential despite persecutions and establishments, plagues and good health, toxic theologies and life-giving witnesses. The Church requires no person, whether they be a faithful adherent or a government official to deem it to be essential. The Church, like God, simply is and will continue to be so beyond the end of the ages. As a result, the Church must act in accordance with its foundation to promote and protect the dignity and value of each person. This means the Church is compelled to abide by state laws that are in concert with this position. In like manner, there are times when the Church must defy laws where the State devalues people. Knowing when and how to take these positions is important and history is full of times when the Church has gotten it both wrong and right. The

point is that the Church can have a variety of relationships with the State and society as a whole. But neither the State, nor society, governs the Church's existence or its status as being essential.

I raise these points because it is easy to be confused in these times as to who has authority to do what, especially when it comes to doing one of the most fundamental functions of human beings: gathering socially. The Church has had since the beginning many tools at its disposal to do its essential work, which is to spread the Good News, or Gospel, of Jesus Christ. Over the years, many tools have come and gone with regard to their usage. Some tools have gone out of use in one era only to be picked up again in another. But in all cases, the tools the Church uses are not the Church itself. Buildings, budgets, rituals, music, and personnel roles are all tools. None of these things are the Church proper. Therefore, all of the tools that are used are subject to the laws of the land, economic efficiencies and the laws of nature whereas the Church itself is subject only to God. It is in this way that the Church decides to use certain tools at certain times and in certain ways. Right now, the virus is making the use of our buildings incompatible with the care of people and thus the work of the Church. The State has determined that gathering in certain numbers in public buildings is at present not safe for the population as a whole. The Church agrees with the State's conclusions because they in concert with the Church's mission and therefore determines to abide with the State's laws governing the use of buildings. Yes, buildings are normally extremely efficient and effective tools for performing the work of the Church. However, for the time being our buildings are not in concert with our mission, and since they are not the Church itself, closing the buildings is the right thing to do, while the Church itself remains permanently open.

In the end, we must remember that it is the virus and its relationship to people that is at the source of our decision-making, not governmental policies or opinions. The fact remains that this virus is new and there is no cure. Because it is new, there is still much we are learning about how it is spread and what level of harm it poses to patients not only in the short term, but in the long term. More importantly, there are currently no known peer-reviewed therapies that exist that consistently and predictably curb deaths. Catching this virus is one thing, but guaranteeing or even predicting survival is another. And with a virus where as many as a quarter of the carriers are asymptomatic and yet infectious, looking out for our neighbors becomes an even more solemn charge, because none of us knows if we are the one's sending people to their death beds or not.

With that said, we at St. Matthew will continue in all-virtual format for the foreseeable future. As restrictions are eased, such as the one yesterday with our Governor allowing gatherings of up to 100 people for worship outdoors on a church's property within a Phase 1 county while maintaining social distancing with masks, etc., creative conversations about feasibility will be had. However, I will share that I am extremely conservative regarding this topic and will likely be more restrictive than our state's guidelines or even the guidelines of our diocese until it is clear that our people are safe. Additionally, when any easing of our all-virtual

format at St. Matthew occurs, the first priority will be to provide services for those who have died. Our typical in-person Sunday gathering will only occur when it is sustainable and safe to do so.

I am thankful for how our parish has adapted so far. Right now we are seeking to expand our connectivity beyond our Sunday morning virtual liturgy and virtual coffee hour and our PIE Buddy Groups. Great additions such as our pop-up *Take 30!* groups have been well received and we are looking at even more opportunities to connect, especially for children. All in all, we are preparing ourselves for the long-haul where we adapt our parish life to fit the circumstances of our time while practicing patience in light of the evidence that is before us. I thank you for receiving this rather long letter. If you have any questions or comments, I may be reached at any time. Please know that I'm proud to serve alongside you and I love you all.

Peace in Christ,

Kendall+

Helpful Links:

The Diocese of Olympia (Evolving) Guidelines for Resuming In-Person Gathering – <https://ecww.org/a-guide-to-gathering-in-person-the-diocese-of-olympias-phased-in-plan-for-resuming-in-person-worship-and-activities/>

An Interesting Blog Piece Highlighting How Different Gathering Will Be - https://millennialpastor.ca/2020/05/26/so-your-church-is-opening-up-after-covid-19-closures-it-wont-be-what-you-are-hoping-for/?fbclid=IwAR1XHDummkwvhmayIVNg86-ENIF4LJq7u8i5rjot4rm_VmF3YXZDqAdqN0E