

August 19, 2020

From the Rector of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Beaumont, Texas:



I wrote back to y'all exactly two months ago today that we were planning to resume in-person worship services. We were all excited about the big leap forward, only to experience a sudden increase in our county's infection rate mere days later. This led us to pause our plans, doing our part to slow the virus spread in our community.

I am happy to announce today that we are now planning on a *soft opening* (just like a restaurant that is easing into opening its doors for the first time) for our in-person worship starting August 30! Hurray!

Your church leadership has been tracking COVID-19 rates in our community and following the consultation of public health officials. As long as things progress as they have in the right direction we expect to slowly ease safety measures over time. We are going to follow the protocols we established back in June, including mask wearing, maintaining 6 feet of social distance, and all the other measures listed at the end of this letter.

Importantly, we are including the extra precaution in this soft opening of initially having an attendance limit of 25 worshippers at the 8:00 am service and 25 worshippers at the 10:00 am service. If you would like to join us for worship in-person, we ask that you let us know in advance at <http://www.ststephensbmt.org/worship.html> so that we can adequately prepare.

Our hope is that, as conditions improve, we can increase the limit from 25 to 50, then someday to 100 at a service. Eventually we expect to ease restrictions on masks, singing, communion, the peace and more. I want to get back to these important expressions of our faith and I know you do too!

Please remember that we will be offering *dual stream* worship, meaning that even once we have our soft opening on August 30, we will continue offering worship online for our worshipers who plan to gather with us from home at 8:00 am and 10:00 am.

If you have any questions, suggestions, or concerns, please know that I'm here for you. You can call me (409-892-4227), text (313-405-3995), email (sbalke@ststephensbmt.org), set up an appointment at <https://stevenbalke.youcanbook.me>, or join us for *Coffee with the Rector* at www.ststephensbmt.org/buildingfellowship.html

God bless y'all and I look forward to joining you for worship, whether online or in-person on August 30!

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven". The letters are cursive and fluid, with a large initial 'S'.

The Rev. Steven M. Balke, Jr.

P.S. If you want to know how we are keeping track of COVID-19 risks in our community, we are using the following assessment tools. Please check them out yourself:

“COVID-19 Event Risk Assessment Planning Tool” by the Bioinformatics Laboratory at Georgia Institute of Technology: <https://covid19risk.biosci.gatech.edu/>

“COVID Warning System, Jefferson County TX Map” by Covid Act Now: https://covidactnow.org/us/tx/county/jefferson_county?s=908179

Health and Safety Protocols for In-person Worship at St. Stephen's

I want to thank everyone who filled out surveys to help us get a sense of the cares and concerns of our people as we plan. Your feedback has been essential and we have created protocols for in-person gatherings recommended to us by public health officials. These safeguards are for all St. Stephen's gatherings starting August 30. We respectfully ask you to join us in these safeguards as a way of honoring each other's health and safety:

Will online gathering for worship go away once we resume in-person gatherings?

Absolutely not! We are happy to keep offering online worship to meet the needs of the many of our members who cannot or who do not yet feel ready to gather in-person. We are excited to have you as a part of our community and you are welcome to participate with us online for as long as you desire.

Will this always be the way we worship?

No, we expect the way we worship to continue to change as our needs change. There are many safeguards we have in place just for now as we begin that we expect not to need over time. Let's think of this as Phase One of getting back to things again. We will continue to stay in communication about safeguards like masks and social distancing as they change.

Is everyone welcome to come to church?

Yes, we welcome everyone who wants to join us. We respectfully ask that if you know you are sick or have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 you join us online instead of in-person. We also ask you to prayerfully consider joining us online instead of in-person if you are particularly at high-risk for serious complications or high-mortality from COVID-19 (this includes people who are over 60, have compromised immune systems, or pre-existing medical or respiratory illness). We will not turn anyone away, but we care about you and want you to be safe.

How many people will be allowed to attend?

For now we are limiting in-person worship to no more than 25 people. We do not expect this to be a problem because over 75% of our parishioners say they plan to keep worshipping online even once we resume in-person. Someday we'll start getting more than 25 again and we will have plans to accommodate more people before that comes. You can track it yourself at:

“COVID-19 Event Risk Assessment Planning Tool” by the Bioinformatics Laboratory at Georgia Institute of Technology: <https://covid19risk.biosci.gatech.edu/>

“COVID Warning System, Jefferson County TX Map” by Covid Act Now: https://covidactnow.org/us/tx/county/jefferson_county?s=908179

Will I be required to wear a mask and stay 6-feet away from others?

Yes, at least as we first resume gathering in-person, wearing a mask and remaining 6-feet away from people who are not living in your household will be required. This is to keep everyone safe. It also honors and respects the wishes of those around us who want to feel safe.

Why can't I skip the mask if I don't think it is risky?

It is important to understand that wearing a mask and keeping 6-feet apart is not just about your safety but about honoring and respecting others around us. We respect your choice if you do not think masks are necessary, but we ask that, while you are on the grounds of St. Stephen's, you respect those who do believe it is necessary. Even if it turns out to not be needed, it is a worthwhile gesture of love to help our friends and neighbors feel safe in their church.

How else will you help keep everyone safe?

All worshippers will be greeted at the doors by a greeter, who will ask everyone before entering if they have been sick, take temperatures, and collect contact info for everyone in attendance (in case we need to reach out to people in case of exposure). Masks will be required and--not to worry--we are happy to provide masks if you do not have one.

There are hand sanitizing stations at the entrances and restrooms. All doors will remain open and the worship space will be well-ventilated throughout worship. The pews will be marked where worshippers can sit to keep safe social distance. There is a separately marked exit for leaving at the end of the service.

Restrooms will have sanitization stations so that you can sanitize all surfaces for your comfort. Please don't forget to sanitize everything when you are finished as a courtesy for the next person too. We will have signs to offer directions and all the sanitizing equipment recommended by health officials as a best practice.

Will we have communion?

At least for the first few Sundays we will continue Morning Prayer. We expect to start offering communion bread after we have gotten used to being the space again. Sharing the wine will come again someday as well, though that will be farther down the road.

How will we do the Peace?

In short, the same way we've been offering each other the Peace of God. We will genuinely offer it to one another and we all understand that the shaking of hands and hugging will be something that has to come back at a later time. I look forward to shaking hands again too, but even from 6-feet away people will know that you genuinely offer them peace.

What about music? Singing is hard in a mask!

At least for now we are asking worshippers to refrain from singing. It appears that singing is one of the easiest ways to spread coronavirus quickly. I want to sing too, but we'll leave the singing to our soloists or professional singers until we get further guidance on how to sing safely around each other again. For now we will still get to enjoy the fine music tradition of our church and look forward to joining in ourselves soon.

What if there is another surge of COVID-19, or worse, someone at St. Stephen's has it?

We certainly hope that the virus subsides and we can start lifting restrictions, but we also recognize that when we resume gathering in-person someone could get sick instead. We promise to stay in close communication if we need to suspend in-person services again or we receive advice from health authorities to suspend.

How will you ensure safeguards are followed by worshippers?

First of all, I trust y'all. I know that, even if you disagree with some rule, you know these safeguards are important to your fellow parishioners. This is an opportunity to put our own desires aside and serve the needs of those around us, and I know you wouldn't have it any other way.

If someone does not feel that they can honor the safeguards now or as they evolve, continuing to join us online remains a great way to participate until the safeguards change (as they will, hopeful with fewer restrictions soon). For your peace of mind, I assure you that, as the rector of the church, I will redirect anyone in attendance who refuses to follow safeguards to please participate with us online instead.

So what does this mean for the future?

We may find we take a few steps forward, then a step back (or a step forward and a few steps back!). The truth is we don't know what things will look like ahead, but we promise to remain in this together and keep working on being the close community of faith that loves and supports each other.

Don't forget that the church had to completely close its doors across the world for months at a time during the pandemic of 1918-20. Churches had several instances of resuming worship and having to close again. It had to be so hard for them too (and they didn't have the modern benefits we enjoy now!). We survived and thrived then and we will do so again this time. We will be even stronger as a community, because we went through adversity together and prevailed, because our faith saw us through trial, and because we showed that our love for each other's safety was a mark of Christ's love for them in this world.