

July 7, 2020

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



Peace be with y'all in the name of Christ our Redeemer,

I am back from my time off, ready to get back to serving the church with renewed energy and fresh ideas. I truly appreciate everyone at St. Stephen's being supportive of my family's own time for respite as well as the vestry and staff's leadership while I was away.

I wish I had cheerier news to report to y'all on my first letter back, but I am sorry to be the bearer of disappointing news: given the state of the pandemic in Beaumont, we will not be able to resume in-person worship on July 12 as we had hoped. For the time being, we will need to continue worshipping online only for now and save our plans to resume in-person gatherings as soon as we are able.

Your vestry, staff, diocesan leaders, and I continue to follow the guidance of public health officials. We have determined that, for the moment, the rapidly increasing spread of COVID-19 in Beaumont makes public worship too dangerous for those we love in our community. In addition, Governor Greg Abbott has modified his executive orders for the state of Texas to prohibit gatherings of greater than 10 people either indoors or outdoors. There is a provision for more than 10 people to gather outdoors only if allowed by Beaumont Mayor Becky Ames or Jefferson County Judge Jeff Branick, but that permission has not been given at this time. Once it has been determined safe in Beaumont for more than 10 people to gather we can return once again to the discussion of resuming in-person worship.

I know how disappointing this turn of events is. It is heart-wrenching for me as well. I long for the time we can gathering in-person once again but remind myself that this is a sacrifice worth making for the people we love. I have said this before but it is worth saying again: we would rather look back at this time and realize we were more cautious than we needed to be than to otherwise look back and regret that people died because we weren't cautious enough.

Given these circumstances, we need to be all the more committed to creatively engaging in relationship with each other as the church. We are more than the four walls of our building and now is a great time to show it! We will continue St. Stephen's work of Worshipping Together, Forming Christians, Building Fellowship, Serving the World, Pastoral Care, and Spreading the Word, with:

- Worship online Sunday mornings at 8 am & 10 am, Wednesday evenings at 5:30 pm (resuming July 15), and Compline nightly at 8:30 pm (resuming July 11).
- *Episcobasics Online* Sundays at 9:00 am and *St. Stephen's Online Bible Study* Fridays at 8:00 am
- *Coffee with the Rector* Mondays at 8:00 am and *Sharing Faith Dinners Online* Thursdays at 6:00 pm
- Mask making, food donations, Harvey & Imelda recovery work, the feeding ministry at Some Other Place, and more ways to serve
- Prayer groups, access to counseling, pastoral care from your priest, and more
- Weekly email updates and daily social media updates from the church to keep you informed

All these creative ways that are being the church in the world together and more can be found right on the front page of the church Website: www.StStephensBmt.org. In addition, your vestry and I are working at being in touch with every member of the church directly, just to check in with everyone, offer prayer, and be in relationship. I hope you all know that you are welcome to reach out to the church anytime as well by email, telephone, or www.StStephensBmt.org/contact. We are here for you even if we can't be all physically together right now.

Coming back from my time off, I have lots of great ideas of things we can do together and I am excited to share those as we roll them out. In the meantime, I promise to stay in close communication as we all figure this out together. Being the Body of Christ during a pandemic was not something for which any of us were trained, but I am very proud of the creative ways in which you have been there for each other.

I hope to see you all this Sunday online and, God willing, in-person again soon. You are in my prayers, now and always,

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

The Rev. Steven M. Balke, Jr.