

June 19, 2020

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



Greetings and blessings to you all in the name of Jesus Christ our Redeemer,

My friends, I have a confession to make to y'all: I miss everyone terribly. From my first day at St. Stephen's I have loved our way of being the church--the hospitality, the intimacy, the generous community--and every day I miss it more. I look forward to the day we can have that back and I pray it comes swiftly.

I also confess that I am struggling with a weight of grief. In a two week span I'll have officiated four funerals--two members of our own church and two others who needed someone to be the church for them in a time of need. COVID-19 has taken the lives of two people personal to me--a family member and a nurse who lost her life trying to save others. The number of new cases of COVID-19 in our community is higher than it has ever been and growing. This has been much to bear while also trying to carefully plan how St. Stephen's can resume public in-person gatherings without bringing harm to the very people we love.

All this is to say I feel now more than ever how important it is to be respectful and gentle with each other as we navigate these times. St. Stephen's is blessed to be a broadly diverse community and we want to honor that diversity. How can we gather again yet help everyone feel safe? How can we meet our own individual faith needs yet also meet the needs of those around us? I am happy to say that your church leadership has carefully developed a plan that walks these many fine lines. Your vestry will keep our public in-person gathering plans in review and we anticipate the go ahead from our bishop in the next few days.

Here is how we are planning on introducing the resumption of public in-person worship:

Sunday, June 21 - St. Stephen's will still have online only worship at 8am and 10am. You are invited to worship with us on our YouTube channel, Facebook, or Twitter.



Sunday, June 28 - St. Stephen's will have two options for Morning Prayer:

- At 9:00 am, we will be holding Morning Prayer outdoors on our grounds by the prayer garden, like a St. Stephen's Prayer Picnic! Bring a lawn chair, bring a prayer book and a beach umbrella, and practice safe social distancing while we practice our faith.
- At 8:00 and 10:30 am, we are invited to join online with our friends at Trinity Episcopal Church in Galveston, TX for Morning Prayer:
<https://www.facebook.com/Trinity-Episcopal-Church-325287770867471>
(you do not need a Facebook account to join the service)

Sunday, July 5 - St. Stephen's will have two options for Morning Prayer:

- At 9:00 am, we will be holding another Morning Prayer outdoors by our prayer garden. Bring a lawn chair, bring a prayer book and a beach umbrella, and practice safe social distancing while we practice our faith.
- At 8:00 and 10:00 am, we are invited to join online with our friends at St. Aidan's Episcopal Church in Cypress, TX, for Morning Prayer:
<https://www.facebook.com/AidansChurch> (no Facebook account needed)

Sunday, July 12 and beyond - St. Stephen's is happy to resume public in-person worship inside the church building, with Morning Prayer at 8:00 am and 10:00am!

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 I want to take a few moments here to address the questions I received. We have created protocols for in-person gatherings recommended to us by health officials. These safeguards are for all gatherings at St. Stephen's, both outdoor on 6/28 & 7/5 and indoor starting 7/12. St. Stephen's respectfully asks you to honor 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 50 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 50 again and we will have plans to accommodate more people before that comes.

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.

Y'all, after worship this Sunday, June 21, my family and I will be taking a short break for the following two weeks. I want to be on top of my game and at my best for this exciting new phase ahead. We will be staying isolated at our home in Indiana (so no worries about me bringing anything back when we gather in-person!). The vestry and church staff will be ever vigilant to your needs as always while I'm away, and I truly look forward to our first Sunday back in the worship building when I return, as well as continuing to participate with everyone else online in celebrating and praying to our God together.

There will no doubt be more communication to come, but, for now, may the peace of God, which passes understanding, keep your heart and mind in the love and knowledge of God through our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Yours in Faith,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Rev. Steven M. Balke, Jr.