



RE: The State of All Saints' Church Four Months Into Pandemic

July 15, 2020

Dear Faithful of All Saints',

Four months ago we took extraordinary steps together as a community in the face of what was then a largely unknown threat. We had hoped that by now we would look back at our radical actions and say that they were made out of an overabundance of caution, turned out to be excessive, and would be, thereby, short-lived. Instead, all of our actions turned out to be utterly necessary in the face of what has become a far-reaching and enduring public health crisis.

I am taking the opportunity in this letter to review those actions, state what we have learned, and address what our next steps shall be. Far from being a period of quiet retreat, the last four months have been a time of constant activity and innovation. What most needs to be said is that by the grace of God and your hard work, generosity, and sacrifice, All Saints' is strong and well even in this continuing storm. We are now far enough into this to know that if we can sustain our present course with everyone pulling together as they have, that All Saints' will not only survive this crisis, but will emerge from it stronger than ever.

What are we facing?

We now know that we are in the middle of a global pandemic involving a highly contagious respiratory virus that has so far killed more than 136,000 Americans, including over 8,300 people in Massachusetts. It is primarily transmitted through the air (although hands and surfaces can also be sources of transmission). Any social situation where people breathe the same air is a possible site of transmission. The more people and the more time involved the more hazardous any given event becomes. It happens to be that much of what we do in church is as personal and intimate as we have always believed it to be. There is no way at this time for a crowd of people to safely be in an enclosed spaced, greeting one another, singing together, and sharing bread and wine. When this fact became clear to us, we needed to invent new ways of being church safely. This was largely the construction of an electronic church to stand side-by-side with the physical church. This has enabled us not only not to close, but to remain open as an even more open and accessible community than we ever have been before.

We committed early to a “Zero Tolerance for Virus Transmission at All Saints” policy that has continued to the present. The reason for this is that every one of you is precious to us. Unlike the transactional businesses that are the ordinary subject of reopening conversations, your relationship to us is continual, for a lifetime (and a bit beyond that!), and what you bring to us is irreplaceable. We care for the dying and grieving. We don’t do anything to bring any of that about. We are committed to suffering in the present to ensure a robust life-together in the near future and the decades to come.

What about worship?

Worship continues to be the center of our shared life even as it is what has been most affected by our choice not to gather together in the physical building. We have instead created online worship services approximating our normal Sunday service. It remains something of an evolving art and we continue to experiment and improve it week by week. Of course, it is no substitute for our in-person worship and it is missing many of the things we treasure most, but I have heard from many people that it has come “feel like church” for them. Many of our parishioners have evolved their own routines of worshipping in their own homes accompanied by our weekly video. Many people deserve our gratitude for their hard work on our service, especially Maggie Marshall and Carl Klein for supplying music in this new and unexpected form and Laura Barry for being our chief video editor (in addition to her other weighty duties as Senior Warden).

How to maintain our thriving Church school has been one of the largest challenges. We committed to convert all church school classrooms and other offerings into an online form. This has proven very effective largely due to the leadership, energy, and enormous creativity of our Director of Religious Education, Laura Marshall, and of our church school teachers. This has been a crucial and much needed support for children and their parents especially while schools have been closed.

Rather than merely devoting ourselves to preserving former things, we have also witnessed the happy creation of some entirely new things. One of them is online Morning Prayer on Wednesdays at 8am. Morning Prayer is a time honored Anglican tradition that had become too difficult to maintain at the church on a regular basis. To see it reappear in our electronic church in a splendid twenty-minute form is a delight. I encourage anyone who hasn’t tried it to see what a great way it is to start a day.

What about pastoral care?

From the outset of the pandemic it was clear to us that we would need to build a robust team for the increased need to care for members of our community, especially those facing isolation and sickness, and relief for food scarcity and other economic impacts. So far, the isolation has been the most widespread manifest problem. Lynne Grillo has led a dedicated group making phone calls and writing cards. If we have overlooked you and you would like to be included in our phone calls, please contact the church office. Anticipating severe economic displacement, we created an employment group. If you have experienced job loss, please contact the church office

to connect with others who are working together to find each other new employment. We do have a food delivery network for parishioners in need led by Danielle Wigmore. If you experience food scarcity, please contact the church office. And, of course, as a people of prayer, we formed a faithful group to pray for individual needs every day. Amy Hunter has led that group and there has been no shortage of requests for prayer.

What about the budget?

As everyone knows, the economic impact of the pandemic is vast and has touched every segment of our society. In the Episcopal Church, congregations are self-supporting and we do not receive funds from the Diocese for our operations (in fact, we, and other congregations, support the Diocese through a small percentage of your gifts to us). This gives us a great deal of self-determination, but it also means that we are responsible for our continued existence. The closure of the building has resulted in the loss of the vast majority of the rental income we received from the building, the loss of non-pledged gifts placed in the weekly offering, and the loss of in-person fundraising events. Pledges from our members, nevertheless, have always been what principally funds our operations. Those pledges have continued—even in this crisis—and that fact has been what has made it possible for us to maintain our staff and continue our ministries to so many people. Your commitment, generosity, and sacrifice as a congregation is remarkable. Naturally, as our vestry carefully reviews the budget monthly as the pandemic continues longer than we imagined, there is some anxiety about the future and worry about how to compensate for lost sources of income. If you happen to be someone who is blessed by not having your income diminished during this crisis, I ask you to please consider increasing your pledge to our annual budget and we will use it to pay necessary operating expenses.

As a normal part of my arrival, I established the Rector's Discretionary Fund that is used exclusively for the relief of parishioners or related individuals facing especially acute challenges (often involving medical crises or other unanticipated emergencies). At the onset of the pandemic I invited gifts to this fund for this special purpose. The outpouring of gifts has been truly humbling and I am very grateful. There have been tragedies during this time and your gifts have made it possible for us to respond in palpable ways that make a massive difference when our dear ones have needed it the most. On behalf of them, I thank you. Gifts continue to be received by the church office for this purpose, but please ensure that they are above and beyond whatever would be pledged to our operating budget since that also remains a priority.

What about the building and our sacred space?

We have not only maintained our building, but also improved it during this time. After an intense conversation, we decided to move forward with the planned renovation of the undercroft (including the classrooms, hallway, and choir room) with new windows, new flooring, new paint, and a redesigned floor plan. Attractive and informative new signs have been placed in front of the church. Necessary repairs were made to the furnace and air conditioning for the church

offices. Special thanks are due to our junior warden, Scott Bempkins, Chris Mills, and everyone involved in our ongoing “Living Stones” campaign.

There are new conversations about how we can provide greater remote participation for events that take place physically in the church for those who cannot attend out of health concerns, distance, or other reasons. The All Saints’ of the near future will be a church combining the physical presence that we cherished in the past supplemented by innovative ways to participate remotely. This was likely the future in any case, but the pandemic has greatly accelerated this process. There will be costs associated with this upgrade of electronic equipment, but its direct benefits will be immediately apparent, especially during the pandemic. When we have an exact proposal, the entire parish will be informed about it. If contributions are forthcoming, we will make the upgrades as soon as possible.

I have occasionally served parishes that have experienced such rapid growth that they add an additional Sunday service. It is a large endeavor to adapt to new circumstances. Adding the online church as a supplement to our physical worship is a similar commitment. I imagine on Sundays in the future parishioners will choose between the 8am, 10am, and online service. The proportion of parishioners at each service would not only depend upon the state of the pandemic, but also upon many other more personal factors. A parishioner in the hospital could attend our service with family members at bedside. Members who temporarily relocate to another part of the world could continue to worship with us until they return. Prospective parishioners, whom we would have never met otherwise, could try us out online before daring to walk through our doors. Endless examples could be multiplied.

What about next steps and regathering?

On May 18th, the Diocese of Massachusetts issued guidelines called, “A Journey by Stages: Gathering, Serving and Growing as The Episcopal Church in Massachusetts During and Beyond a Time of Pandemic.” That document, and any additional counsel from the Diocese, is what is governing our next steps forward. It mandates a fairly complicated and rigorous process of planning and approval of any parish plans before any in-person gathering takes place. It also counsels congregations not to proceed until what they are heading toward “feels like church.” All Saints’ is in the process of commissioning a “Regathering Commission” whose members, along with myself, the wardens, and the Vestry will determine how best to proceed for the remainder of the pandemic. One of several tasks of this commission will be to listen to our membership and report and respond to what is heard. I imagine that part of this process at some point will be a survey of members gauging under what circumstances the majority of the congregation will feel confident in returning to physical gathering. We know we are not there yet and this commission is committed to not forfeiting our hard won gains and sacrifices these last four months by bungling the regathering process.

Regathering mismanaged, even if it does not result in infections and spread of the virus, would result in the stripping away of vital supports those responsibly isolating themselves for the sake

of their health have come to depend upon. It is essential that as we plan how best to approach the unknown future and eventually regather physically that we continue to supply those electronic means and pastoral care that have come to mean so much to so many.

What to expect this fall?

Given that we put together much of what we are currently doing quickly in response to the crisis, there are likely a number of gaps that need addressing. We expect to address these one at a time and that over the course of the fall new things will continue to appear. Some possibilities include the following: a few more “live worship” opportunities for gathering and spontaneity, somehow to have the Eucharist periodically, improved shared singing, more opportunities for parishioners to engage directly with me, some online adult education group opportunities, and an occasional family worship service that includes the church school. Are there others? If you have an idea and a plan, please share it with us.

One of the challenges about the fall is to expand our ministries in these suggested ways and others without burning out our core people who can’t do much more. I suspect that there are a number of talented people who we haven’t yet enlisted in our online ministries. One of the key tasks for the late summer is finding these people, discerning their gifts, and incorporating them into what we’re doing. If you want to participate more, but don’t know how, please let us know.

We all hope there will be no resurgence of the virus in Massachusetts and no so-called “second wave.” That being said, *I continue to ask that anyone diagnosed with COVID-19 or is hospitalized call my cell phone directly.* I will keep all names in confidence, but it will enable me to understand the extent the virus is present in our community and coordinate our efforts to support those in need.

If you have questions or concerns about matters raised in this letter, please look for an announcement shortly of a series of online question and answer sessions with me about pandemic matters, All Saints’, and anything related to living the Christian life.

The challenge before us continues to be immense. We have made great strides and continue to face it with open hands and generous hearts, together, knowing that God is faithful.

In Christ,



The Rev. Dr. Paul Kolbet
Interim Rector