

Thoughts on “Re-opening” Churches by Tracy Keenan, Missional Presbyter

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New Castle Presbytery

All things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial. – 1 Cor. 10:23

Hey, beloveds.

People are asking about guidelines for re-opening our churches. Since our presbytery includes both Maryland and Delaware, we have two governors offering guidance. And, of course, local jurisdiction holds sway, so if your particular town or county may call things differently. There are so many unknowns in all of this, and our church membership population tends to be the very picture of “vulnerable population,” **so we are seeking to be faithful and caring.**

No matter your politics, we can agree that we would like our congregants to stay alive and well.

Some of the specifics for gathering back at church, you have probably been researching:

- Vulnerable populations are encouraged to stay home. This includes people over the age of 65 and anyone with health issues. Will you put up a sign on your church door advising who may enter and who may not?
- In Delaware’s document, the first paragraph says that gathering in person is still discouraged. But for those who really want to, physical distancing of 6’ between people and households, side to side, front, and back. In Maryland, the recommendation is 7’ all the way around.
- In Delaware, no more than 30% capacity gathered in a space, and that includes clergy, musicians, etc. In Maryland, no more than 50% capacity. Please, read these documents yourselves – they are posted in our docket, and you can find them online.
- Masks must be worn indoors. (And remember that touching, removing and then replacing masks means immediate use of hand sanitizer.)
- Follow CDC guidelines and governmental recommendations responsibly. CDC guidelines also talk about the cleaning of spaces thoroughly, so even multiple services to accommodate numbers would involve disinfecting spaces between. Cleaning crew alone is daunting.
- Then they advise no pew bibles, no hymnals, no offering plates, no passing of the peace; bulletins are self-serve and must be tossed afterwards; no coffee hour; there was one recommendation of serving communion by salad tongs by a masked pastor, baptism by squirt gun (okay, that’s what one priest posted on Facebook), but seriously, no anything that involves close interaction between people.
- Factors include proximity of person to person, airflow, indoors vs. outdoors, and time of exposure. One recommendation was that worship ought not be more than one hour, which may come as a relief to some of our folks.
- Then – and here’s a heart-breaker – singing, laughing, and loud talking are close to coughing in terms of sharing whatever germs you might have. Choir, congregational hymn-singing, even with masks, is a danger for now.
- Add to the mix no nursery or child care, and myriad other complications, and you may wonder how satisfying it would actually be to resume worship in the sanctuary.
- PLUS: You would do well to check with your church insurance carrier and see what THEY recommend.

But wait. Maybe we don’t need to be in such a hurry.

We have parsed the scientific ramifications to pieces, and are unanimous in wanting to keep our congregants and communities safe. No one wants to endanger their beloved members.

But what about the spiritual ramifications?

You have spent the past two and a half months learning new ways of being church without having the church building be the central focus. You have inspired one another with your creativity, asking,

How can we best preach the gospel right now?

How can we best love our people right now?

How can we best teach and pray and connect right now?

How can we best create new and deeper relationships right now?

You're getting pretty good at this. You're at the point now where your hair is no longer on fire. You are no longer frantic. You have this gift now of pausing, stepping back, breathing, and asking what God is doing here, what the Holy Spirit is calling us into.

What's the rush?

The danger here, besides the scientific one – **is the spiritual danger that we will miss this opportunity, that we will be so distracted by the measuring and masking, so obsessed with sanitizers and scolding, trying to decide who can enter our churches and who we should keep out (!), and so bent on some anemic effort at replicating public gathering, that we stop asking the questions about how we can best BE church in this time, not best imitate what we were.**

We are finally at a pausing point where we can explore the questions that could help us blossom into something even more faithful than what we were before. How else might we continue reaching people beyond our walls? We are learning to be curious, to learn about others without trying to get them in our doors so we can “assimilate them.” We are opening our eyes to what God is doing in their lives. We find ourselves walking alongside them in this holy journey, sharing our experiences, deepening our love. Why try to force this blossom to open?

Instead of jonesing to get back to the way it was, how about asking God what's next?

“Playing it safe” should only pertain to protecting our communities from the *virus*. This is our time to let the Holy Spirit have its way with us. We are being changed. What's the rush? There's no deadline. **There's only the very real danger that we may hurry past this holy invitation in order to crawl back into a past that will not offer the comfort we dream it will.** This has to unfold. We are poised on the edge of the unknown. **Take the pressure off. Something new is emerging. It is organic and wondrous. Give it time.**

How about if your next step, if you haven't already done this, is simply to put together a team of people representative of your congregation **and prayerfully imagine your way through all of this and more?** Read the CDC and state documents, yes, but read your Bible. Read the signs of new life nibbling at the edges of your newfound virtual gatherings. Pray together. Spin out scenarios. Let yourselves get anxious and silly and passionate. Allow some no holds barred brainstorming. **Stop trying to force the past to return.**

When it's truly safe for us to gather again as the people of God, we will be different, thanks be to God. I don't know what this new thing will look like. Some kind of hybrid worship with both online and physical? Or what even that new thing will grow into.

The only long range plan God gives us is that love wins.

In the meanwhile, God calls us beyond our comfort in every age and circumstance. Ours age and circumstance is now. Let the Holy Spirit shake us up and make a new thing grow out of this.

What's your hurry?

Bottom line is this:

**You are free to do as you feel led. We must respect each other's discernment.
But we strongly encourage you to take your time before opening your doors.**

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