



Grace and peace to All in this Eastertide,

Let's be real. I have had it with this virus. I'm tired of staying home alone. I miss my family and friends. Zoom church has lost its luster. I yearn to be in church, preaching a live sermon, singing beautiful hymns, praying with people around me, and schmoozing at coffee hour. My self-discipline is wearing a little thin. And I worry more than necessary about our churches and their financial futures. I am grieving all the people connected to my circles who have become ill or died. I am grieving all the events and plans that have been canceled or will be canceled. I watch in horror as so many people are pushed over the financial brink, or are required to endanger themselves at work in order to keep their jobs, and the fault lines in our society are fully exposed. I am not alone in this, I know.

In the midst of this and so much more, the possibility of returning to in-person church is emerging, and it connects so strongly with our yearning for what seems *normal*. In her recent orders, Governor Mills has allowed the possibility that groups of 50 or less could gather with proper precautions sometime after June 1. Already I am hearing about congregations planning for that moment. Already I hear of conflicts emerging over when and how to resume.

This can be a time when church leaders shine as they help congregations adapt to our changing landscape. At the same time, we are ripe for conflict. We will have many different opinions on what is needed and right at this time. Some will wish to move quickly, others will be cautious. Some are confident in their good health and others are at risk by reason of age and/or medical condition. Our nerves are frayed, and we could very easily descend into conflict at a time when we most need to hang together and make adaptive decisions for the good of all.

Throughout this Pandemic, I have been asked to provide guidance on the next steps for our churches. The same is true now, at what is likely the hardest moment. The decision about when and how to resume in-person worship will be much harder than the original decision to cease worship. There are so many unknowns, and each of our churches has unique circumstances of space, demographics, geography, community, and culture, etc. So, I will not be stating a date to resume. I will be suggesting some processes and questions for your consideration.

Here are some suggestions on how to proceed and some questions (not an exhaustive list) to consider as church leaders embark on these discussions. While it is not yet time to return to our buildings, it is time to begin a healthy and effective discernment, decision-making, and planning process. This can, and should, be a time when we continue to do our best as a community. These are not decisions to be made lightly or quickly. Taking a measured approach and engaging in good processes will have long-term benefits for the whole church.


- Start with conversations about how your congregation and its people are doing right now. Engage in prayerful times of listening for God's voice and leading. What have you learned over the last weeks – about yourselves, your faith, your priorities? What are some good surprises? What are some burdens or challenges? What will you be leaving behind as a result of this time? What will you continue to do that is new? What do you want church to be like when you return to your building? Hint #1: It will not be the same. Plan now for how it will be different. Hint #2 – we have realized how deeply we value community and connections during this time, how has our understanding of our faith community changed?
- As you embark on your decision-making, the best thing to do is create good processes. Make sure that all viewpoints are heard and considered. Make sure that the interests of all the people of the church are taken into consideration, especially those who are the most vulnerable. Focus on the health and safety of congregants first. Gather facts and information from reliable and expert sources, such as the Maine CDC, our Governor's office and the Maine Council of Churches. Communicate your process to church members and invite their participation. Maybe some special Zoom meetings are needed for this purpose. Be transparent, thoughtful, listen well, and do not rush.
- Study the advice for a phased return to church that will be published by the Maine Council of Churches (with input from the Maine CDC) later this week. Can you do the work that is contemplated there? Is it practical for your congregation to do the level of cleaning needed for safety? Will the people of your congregation be able to discipline themselves to stay distanced and observe the hygiene requirements, and if they cannot, who will be responsible for enforcing the practices? (Note: this cannot be the Pastor). Is there room in the church to be properly distanced? What about children? In general, what is realistic, practical, and do-able for your church?
- Are there steps to take before opening for worship? Would committees meet in small groups, properly distanced? Would we take some time to hold memorial services that were postponed in recent weeks? Are there other phases that would be helpful before opening the building for worship?
- What are your congregation's values about inclusion? Will it be appropriate to have healthier, younger people back in church while older/medically vulnerable people stay home on Zoom? What percentage of the congregation is in the high-risk population? What effect will this have on your community as a whole? How would people continue to feel included? Especially since so many folks have been able to participate online, and might feel left out again.

- What is your Pastor's reality? Are they comfortable with returning to the building? Your Pastor's viewpoint matters greatly in this discussion. Are they in any of the higher risk groups? Over 60? Medical challenges? What would be the implications of starting in-person worship before it is safe for your Pastor to be among you? Will preparing for two types of worship (in person and zoom/streaming) be a further burden to a likely deeply exhausted Pastor? What effect will this have on ministry in your congregation?
- Assuming you have plans for cleaning and distancing etc., what is your plan if someone comes to church, contracts COVID-19 there, and becomes ill or even dies? How will you engage that reality? How will you mitigate most effectively against it happening?
- Are you expecting summer visitors? If so, how likely is it that they will observe the 2-week quarantine requirement? Will many of them come from "hotspot" areas? Would their presence increase the congregation above 50 people?
- There is clear evidence that singing is actually a high-risk activity. Will you be able to hold church without congregational singing or a choir? See Maine Council of Churches advice here: <http://mainecouncilofchurches.org/2020/04/mcc-advises-against-drive-in-stay-in-car-church-services-during-the-covid19-emergency/>.

This is not an exhaustive list but does reflect some of the core questions our churches will need to address before worshipping in our buildings again. It all comes down to loving our neighbors as ourselves. I'll expect to provide further guidance as our situation evolves.

We are called to make our decisions wisely so that we build up our faith communities and provide for the health and thriving of our congregants. The Pandemic has revealed unmistakably our radical interdependence, which is a great blessing as well as a great challenge to our ways of thinking. May we make decisions that honor our interconnectedness. May we grow in wisdom, connection, and love as a result of this trial. May we lead well as we adapt to a changing world with courage and grace.

In Christ's peace,



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