

# ST. CHRISTOPHER'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

7845 NORTH RIVER ROAD + RIVER HILLS WI 53217 + 414.352.0380

May 19, 2020

Notice to The Rt. Rev'd Steven Miller and Diocesan 'Way Forward' Task Force  
Regarding Re-Opening Measures at St. Christopher's:

Dear Bishop and Task Force Members,

I write you regarding our parish intentions as it pertains to potential re-engagement of in-person group worship in light of the present status of Coronavirus in America. First let me express my appreciation as a member of the task force for the faithful efforts being made by all its members. Thank you.

We have undergone considerable discernment regarding potential re-opening for worship. That includes a sober look and honest examination of what such worship might be like, given available information regarding virus transmission, affect, treatment, and absence of vaccine. Our discernment breaks down into the following factors:

**1. Parish Demographic**

Upon examination of the parish membership we find that 51% of our people fall into a high-risk category due to age and/or known infirmity.

**2. Problematic Exclusion**

Even with prescribed precautions of PPE, Distancing, Tracing, Group Size, etc. we feel compelled to urge the high-risk category to consider refraining from in-person worship. The volume of people there represented is of great concern to our leadership.

**3. Problematic Inclusion**

Even with warning, some persons of high risk will still feel compelled to participate, placing everyone in an uncomfortable position. There is also concern that compliance with precautionary requirements may be lax, generating potentially negative encounters. Of the 49% of persons in the non-high risk pool, roughly half are very occasional in worship attendance to begin with. Among the remaining 25% there is no way of knowing which persons have undisclosed conditions.

**4. Logistical Considerations**

Performing necessary sanitization of the worship space raises questions over who would be responsible for it, what damage it may cause to wooden surfaces, and how to verify thoroughness of the work.

**5. Liability**

We contacted our insurance carrier (Church Insurance Group of Vermont) and discovered our liability coverage does not extend to communicable diseases. They were very nice and wanted be helpful, and yet the message was clear that we would be on our own - a clear concern.

**6. Present Impressions**

Our parish members are not clamoring to return to group worship without assurances to their safety. I can honestly report that we have not received a single call to that effect. We currently host a Sunday Morning Prayer Service via Zoom, as well as a 10am prayer and reflection session each weekday. These are

well attended and keep people connected under the circumstance. We receive very good feedback and consider the situation stable.

## 7. Lasting Impact

We have worked very hard for the past few years to cultivate a culture of genuine inclusion, joyful worship, vibrant fellowship, and purposeful mission. There is great concern over bringing people back under the guise of distancing, masking, safety concerns, even paranoia. Extracting all singing and in-person fellowship adds to what we believe to be an experience so far removed from what we have come to know that the benefits may be far outweighed by myriad risks. Our particular concern is for the children. We feel deeply compelled to consider their impression of a radical shift from what they experience as a loving, warm experience to something dramatically different, even potentially 'creepy'. We believe there to be a legitimate trauma exposure to be considered.

In light of these considerations, we believe it in the best interest of our worship community to remain on the present course until which time we can gather with confidence. Realizing how fluid the situation is, and how much remains to be known about the virus and its lasting presence, we intend to re-evaluate the situation regularly.

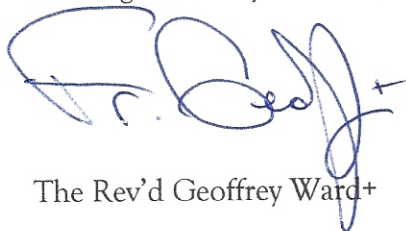
That said, we are quite concerned that, aside from physical illness from the virus, the chief problem for our people is anxiety produced by uncertainty. In order to mitigate that to the fullest extent, we are communicating our plans in time increments of five weeks or more. We are also conducting a survey of the congregation to solicit opinions and feelings regarding worship, fellowship, education, communication and mission.

This week we are sending the full congregation five weeks of worship materials for online offerings so they are able to make plans for their family. That takes us from Pentecost Sunday to the June 28th. In the absence of substantial change, we will likely to do the same for the period of July 1<sup>st</sup> through Labor Day. We are prepared to continue that cycle as long as necessary with prayerful anticipation of the time for confidence to arrive.

As a priest with Anglo-Catholic upbringing and a deep love for the full presence of Christ in our Eucharistic Feast, it is very painful to make such a decision. Still, I am reminded that our primary call as Christians is to live into our Baptismal Covenant of seeking and serving Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves. We have come to believe this to be the optimum way to love, given the conditions we face.

Our leadership will continue the work of tending our flock and feeding our people spiritually through every available means, even as we await safe return to The Table.

Blessings and Prayers for Safety and Health,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Geoffrey Ward', with a small cross at the end of the signature.

The Rev'd Geoffrey Ward+