

---

## Checking In This Week

*Jesus our brother,  
you followed the necessary path  
and were broken on our behalf.  
May we neither cling to our pain  
where it is futile,  
nor refuse to embrace the cost  
when it is required of us:  
that in losing ourselves for your sake,  
we may be brought to new life. Amen.*

(Janet Morley)

We are coming up on about the sixth week since operations have pivoted, and we have been seeking ways to be, and feel like, we are together in this time that we are physically apart. A couple of questions have come up, and we thought it might be helpful to provide the explanations to the wider community for clarity about how decisions are being made and about what concerns are being weighed.

### **Why is the church building closed?**

The Episcopal Church has suspended all in-person services, gatherings, and meetings until the end of May. As a member parish of the Episcopal Church, we are abiding by the guidelines of the whole church and the Diocese of California.

Both of your staff clergy have always served in churches that were open to the public for prayer every day. Access to the sacred space rates as one of the highest values for both of us. We have weighed the decision to restrict access to the building with great care and consternation.

In making this decision we considered state guidelines and consulted with an expert on infectious diseases and with local town/city/county authorities. Right now, we are acting on their ongoing and updated guidance and recommendations.

As you most likely know, these guidelines and practices often change weekly, and even daily. We continue to discuss and reevaluate how to balance public safety with pastoral care. Any decision to re-open will be made in light of the most reliable public health information available and in accordance with Episcopal Church guidelines.

### **Why can't we come into the sanctuary for prayer?**

We are allowed to complete essential tasks, like grocery shopping, with masks and proper social distancing. Isn't prayer an essential task?

Yes, prayer is an essential task! But *where* we can pray is in no way limited to our church sanctuary. We do, however, have people who need to come into the space to do work—so called site-specific tasks. We are trying to maximize the safety of those who need to come into this particular space to fulfill their work obligations.

It is possible to visit the Memorial Garden as a place for sanctuary and prayer. Please bring a face covering with you and plan to social distance when others are there.

Again, we are following the protocol prescribed by the bishop of California and the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church as well as state and local authorities and medical experts. We remain in compliance with these required and recommended restrictions.

### **What about “take out” communion?**

This question has come up and one can turn to much more eloquent, and authoritative theologians than I to address this query.

Currently we are following the directives of our Presiding Bishop, the Most Rev'd Michael Curry:

“Practices such as ‘drive by communion’ present public health concerns and further distort the essential link between a communal celebration and the culmination of that celebration in the reception of the Eucharistic Bread and Wine. This is not to say that the presence of the Dying and Rising Christ cannot be received by any of these means. It is to say that from a human perspective, the full meaning of the Eucharist is not obviously signified by them.”

The full directive may be found here:

<https://episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/presiding-bishop-michael-currys-word-church-our-theology-worship>

Further, Bishop Michael Hunn of The Episcopal Diocese of the Rio Grande has written an important piece that I would like to quote.

*Much has been said and written about how to respond to the COVID-19 epidemic with respect to the Holy Eucharist....First and foremost, the Holy Eucharist is a gift from God through our Lord Jesus Christ. From that night in the upper room until today faithful Christians have consistently celebrated Eucharist in times of war, in times of famine, in times of disease. The celebration of the Eucharist never includes the entire membership of the church and yet it always includes the entirety of the Communion of the Saints. Every single celebration of the Eucharist is done, not only for the sanctity of those who are physically present, but for the saving of the entire world. The Church does not ordain people because we need community organizers who gather people together. We ordain priests to preside at the liturgy and to teach the faith. We ordain deacons so that the Church will continue to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. Clergy are called by the community to fulfill important sacramental functions. The Church needs its clergy to continue doing what the Church has called us to do and the celebration of the Holy Eucharist is the primary work of every priest and every bishop.*

*I hear clergy from across the Church concerned that celebrating the Eucharist without everyone physically present is somehow inhospitable or unwelcoming.*

*I agree that we need to be hospitable. However, we need to remember that Christ is the host of the Holy Eucharist. Christ invites us to the table. Christ doesn't wait for us to gather before extending the invitation. We are not the ones acting here. We are responding to the action of God. It is not our hospitality which is being shared at the altar of God. The hospitality of the Church is the consequence of the Holy Eucharist, not its cause.*

*In the Eucharist Christ is giving us the food and drink which we need to live. Christ is offering himself, suffering with those who suffer, and inviting us to walk with him through the grave to eternal life. This is what the Eucharist is all about, and it is what the Eucharist does for and to us. The Eucharist makes us the Body of Christ; our gathering does not make the Eucharist.*

*Christ is still inviting us to the Holy Eucharist, and we ...servants of Christ, the handmaidens at the table, must do our duty to show up for work on behalf of Christ, serving the people of God by celebrating the Eucharist which always and everywhere includes the entire world. Christ's embrace is always that wide. Even if the vast majority of Christian people must refrain from gathering physically – as I believe we should right now – the Church must not decline the invitation of Christ by stopping the regular celebration of the Eucharist.*

*The Church must keep the feast ... but how? As we always have done. Every celebration of the Eucharist is physically incomplete – there is never perfect attendance. Still, we must remember that every celebration of the Holy Eucharist is spiritually complete. Furthermore, the Eucharist is fundamentally inclusive of the whole of creation. It is offered for, and thereby includes, everyone. There has never been any quorum larger than*

*two required for the Eucharist to be celebrated — where two or three are gathered the fullness of the Body of Christ is made manifest, a fullness that always includes those who are not physically present.*

*This present situation, where many are not able to be in church on Sunday, is not unprecedented, and we already have the theology we need in order to face this crisis.*

At St Stephen's Church, we continue to offer Holy Communion to all who desire it. The bread and wine, holy food and drink, are received in full, and in fullness, by those who desire to receive this sacrament of grace spiritually.

### **When will we be able come back to worship together?**

The short answer is, we don't know. We are entering a time of deeper ambiguity and increased potential risk to public health as our politicians at the local, state and federal levels wrestle with various pressures and circumstances. However, the public health authorities remain clear about a number of significant factors: the number of cases of COVID-19 continues, as well as the number of deaths; the capacity for testing or contact tracing is still inadequate to make reliable judgments about the spread of the virus; and there remains no widely effective treatment. The most promising way to contain the virus and keep populations safe is to remain at home as much as possible; maximize physical distance; avoid social settings of more than 10 persons; minimize non-essential travel, and maintain self-isolation after travel.

In the meantime, while we may not be gathering in person, we are gathering, and not only online. The Church never closes. The doors of our buildings may be shut, but the vibrant ministry of the people of God continues beyond any walls.

### **What can I do at home?**

---

- Create a sacred space, a little altar or dedicated place for prayer.
  - Carve out sacred time: build prayer, reflection, journaling, study, exercise into a grounding routine.
  - Join with others across the Episcopal Church for Morning and Evening Prayer: *[A Morning at the Office](#)* and *[An Evening at Prayer](#)* are available on all major podcast platforms by Forward Movement.
- 

### **How can I stay connected?**

---

- Worship together through live-streamed services
  - Attend Zoom groups and Bible studies. Visit St Stephen's Central for updates on how to join groups.
  - Call and FaceTime each other to check in.
  - Subscribe to and read the Parish Newsletter *Tidings* for updates.
-