



ALL SAINTS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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My Dear Friends:

It has now been over two months that we have been unable to worship and gather together as a faith community in one place due to the COVID-19 viral pandemic. Two months is a long time in circumstances like these. For not only is our country affected by this epidemic, but so are the four corners of the earth. Over three hundred and thirty-five thousand people globally have died, of which nearly one-third have been in the United States alone. And the threat of this virus has affected all of us in some way or another. We have never seen anything like this in our own lifetime – schools, businesses, restaurants, and churches were forced to close. The infrastructures of our existence and life as we know it came to a grinding halt and were replaced by separation and isolation, pain and illness, fear and uncertainty, death and grief, not just for our nation but for the entire world.

Obviously, we have been experiencing cabin fever and there is a tremendous energy to get out after this long period of confinement and isolation in our homes, and not having the freedom to move around as we are accustomed.

Re-opening

However, now that the number of new confirmed cases appear to be decreasing, some businesses and institutions are reopening, if only on a limited basis. Federal, state, and county officials are talking about re-opening in stages, and what that should look like as we still try to maintain the health of our communities. Many questions must be addressed: When will we reopen? How will we do it? What are the procedures and policies? What are the protocols? What will happen when we do reopen?

“On Being Faithful” document

The Bishop's Office has provided a document, entitled “On Being Faithful,” outlining guidelines for a shared discernment on the way ahead as we begin to think of reopening our churches, even as this pandemic is still among us. In a nutshell, the purpose of the document is three-fold:

1. To offer hope to our communities in this uncertain time.
2. To assist us to think about how we can imagine gathering again in our church buildings.
3. To be a resource to finding clarity about managing our budgets and finances and the changes that may need to be made during this time of COVID-19 and beyond.

Deanery Meetings

I have attended two Deanery meetings, via Zoom, on Thursday, May 14 and 21, concerning the

The Reverend Anthony B. Holder, D. Min., *Rector*
The Reverend Alan Gellert, *Deacon*

reopening of our churches and what that process may look like. The first was with the Bishop, Canon to the Ordinary, clergy and lay members of the North Palm Beach Deanery. Our church was well represented at the first meeting with about 10 members. At this meeting, the Bishop informed us that church campuses would remain closed until the end of the first week in June and afterwards he will not be informing churches as to when they shall reopen. The reason being that “what may be right in Key West may not fit what is right in Jensen Beach.” It is dependent on the situation in each parish and deanery, and the need to move forward cautiously and in stages.

In the second meeting, attended only by the Deanery’s clergy, we further discussed the document as prepared by the Bishop’s Office, and shared concerns that are being expressed among members of our churches who are both for and against a speedy reopening.

Meeting of Episcopal Rectors in Martin’s County

Nevertheless, I am looking forward to a meeting with the four other rectors of the Episcopal Churches in Martin County (Fr. Paul Collins - Advent, Palm City; Fr. Todd Cederberg - St. Mary’s, Stuart; The Rev. Donna Hall - St. Monica’s, Stuart; and The Rev. Carol Barron - St. Luke’s, Port Salerno), scheduled for next Wednesday, May 27. In this meeting, we plan to share what each church is planning for the re-entry process, and to coordinate timelines so that we can re-open more or less together since we share a similar geographical area and ethos. We believe that by trying to open our church campuses together, it would minimize the anxiety among our parishioners as to why some Episcopal churches in our area are reopening while others are not. In addition, by communicating with each other, we will recognize and respect that we are in this together and need to share with one another as Episcopal Churches in the Treasure Coast community.

Re-Entry Planning Task Force

One of the essential factors that the Bishop requires from each congregation is the forming of a Re-Entry Planning Committee or Task Force, who will discern and focus on the process of re-entry into our churches. At All Saints’, a task force has been established, and will be chaired by the Senior Warden, Paul Neff. The members of the Task Force will include: Jenny McDonald, the Office Manager; Lelah Marzi, who is a health professional; Julie Preast, who serves in community-related committees and organizations and has a wealth of information in related matters (Lelah and Julie are members of our church); Stuart’s Vice-Mayor Eula Clarke, an attorney, community advocate, and member of St. Monica’s Episcopal Church; and, in addition to the Senior Warden, the members of our church’s Executive Committee: Jack Miller, Junior Warden; Joan Whitting, Clerk; Bill Winsemann and Pam Hurd, Treasurer and Assistant Treasurer respectively, and yours truly, as Rector.

Congregational Development Survey

The Bishop’s Office, through the Congregational Development Department, sent a brief survey to the churches in the Diocese to help assess the financial picture of our churches and to determine the resources needed to create a stable financial foundation as we move forward through this time of COVID-19. The survey also asked questions related to pastoral, educational, and worship ministry, offered mostly in a technological or electronical way. These questions included whether our churches have websites, offer worship opportunities on Sundays and during the week, present online donation capabilities, offer weekly Christian Education opportunities, and communication with the congregations virtually, electronically or by phone.

All Saints’ responded to the 14 questions in the affirmative with the exception of one, which we are considering. We have received phone calls from both members of the clergy and laity across the Diocese complimenting us on our Sunday services and the work that we are doing during this time. Some requested

our assistance and expertise in livestreaming services professionally, while others felt that as a smaller church we were doing more than many churches, including larger ones.

All in all, I think the survey bears testimony to the positive things that are taking place at All Saints' from a financial, technological, and ministerial (pastoral, educational, and worship) point of view, and for this we God the thanks, praise, and glory.

Closing Comments

The process of worshiping in the way we once did is a long way off. I am not going to tell you that the process is going to quickly get back to normal...because it will not. There will be various phases and hoops we are going to have to jump through. The exercise of patience and precaution are necessary components in the process of reopening our campus for in-person gatherings and services. We need to re-open in a thoughtful and smart manner and not be hurried into it, while at the same time providing ways in which we can have in-person gatherings and worship again. Hurrying into having "business as usual" could be detrimental to our faith community. Since we are an elderly congregation, our primary concern must be to do what is safe, and will preserve the health of the people whom I love and serve in this parish. The plan that the Task Force and I present, which will need the Bishop's approval, will follow the guidelines proposed by the health authorities and the Diocese.

Furthermore, reopening does not necessarily mean that we may not have to close again in the event that confirmed cases emerge or that the situation in Martin County or the state of Florida or in our country escalates again. This is why it is vitally important that we follow the guidelines of the health professionals locally and nationally and devise a plan that is as close to being safe as possible.

More importantly, we must not lose faith, for God is always present with us. God calls us to exercise strength and courage in difficult times like these and to depend on Him in all things. One important lesson that I hope we have learnt as a result of this pandemic is that we wait on God to get us through the challenging times in our lives. May we continue to wait patiently on Him and be of good cheer and courage as we move into this next phase of our journey in this life.

I wish you, your families, and loved ones a blessed and enjoyable Memorial Day weekend.

Every blessing!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Anthony +", with a stylized cross at the end.

Father Tony