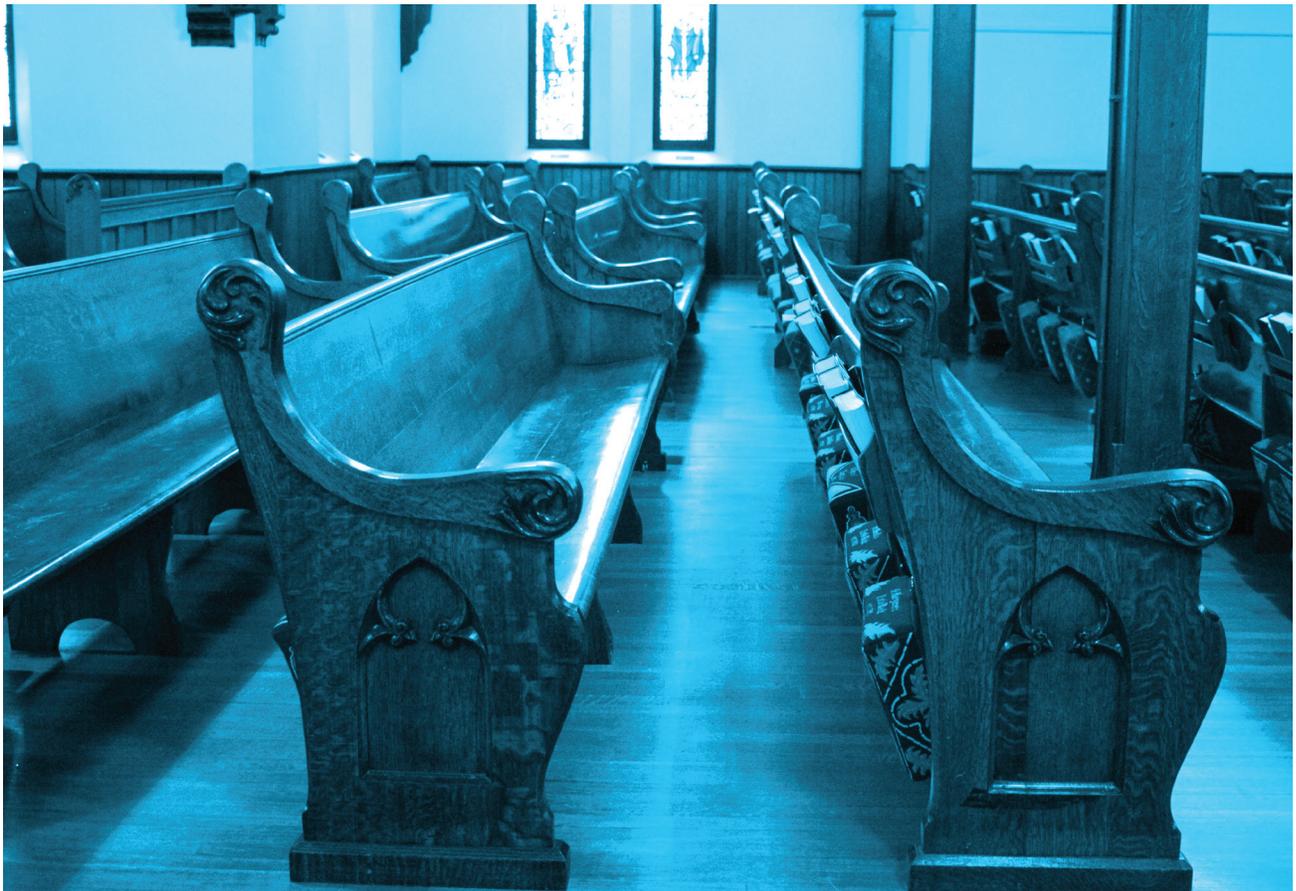


Our Approach to Regathering

Our plans will be based on the best advice we can obtain from public health resources, government agencies, and the larger church. We will spend the month of May preparing.



Summary

May is a time for planning, listening, and communicating how things will be different.

Throughout May, we will continue to worship online rather than in person.

Guiding Principles

Two thousand years ago, the friends and first followers of Jesus were at first afraid when they discovered an empty tomb—something they had not expected—but that fear turned into confidence as they realized that there was new life among them. They found ways to gather, initially going to the Temple for worship as well as meeting in their homes to share meals. Within forty years of the events of Good Friday, their world was turned upside down for a second time when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. Yet again, they found new ways to gather.

Ever since, when the church faced enormous trials, natural disasters, or plagues, it still found ways to regather after such events, all the while looking to the future with confidence and the knowledge that all will be well, just as Julian of Norwich assured people in the fifteenth century in those tumultuous times. The church remains just as hopeful in 2020.

We face challenges as a church in this age of pandemic, but we are confident that the church is up to the challenge. Over the next few months we in Arkansas will find ways to bring our community back together in person, always mindful that we will look out for the health of everyone around us.



In the Episcopal Church in Arkansas we will take actions that:

- Are sensible and transparent, taken in consultation with one another.
- Keep worship at the heart of our shared, community experience.
- Focus on compassion for others, our primary call as Christians.

Our plans to move forward and our actions will be based on the context in which each congregation finds itself, as well as the best advice we can obtain from public health resources, government agencies, and the larger church.

During the coming months we hope to gradually reopen our churches for in-person worship, education, and outreach. In anticipation of opening our doors once again, we will spend the month of May preparing.

What We Will Do in May

May is a time for planning, listening, and communicating how things will be different later.

Good social distance protocols that we will follow include remaining at least six feet from one another and using masks, particularly when keeping at least six feet from another person is not possible.

We will continue to worship online rather than in person. The only people who ought be in church offices or worship spaces will be staff, liturgical leaders, and people who are cleaning the church in anticipation of reopening, all of whom follow social distance protocols and gather in groups of ten or less.

If singers are used as a part of online or recorded worship services, they should practice social distancing of more than six feet, preferably at least twelve feet.

During the month, leaders in each congregation need think through the following questions:

- With those in high-risk categories likely continuing to stay at home for some time into the future, how will you reach them and serve them on an ongoing basis?
- If you are currently offering online worship, what do you need to do to ensure that the practice can continue once there is also in-person worship taking place?
- How many people can your worship space hold if you are worshipping in household groups sitting at least six feet apart? How will you physically mark where people may or may not be present? Who will guide people to “safe” locations? Will you use rooms such as parish halls if those rooms provide more space than church?
- How will you cap attendance at services so you don’t go over guidelines? Will you add more services? Will you require reservations for worship at a particular time? Who will be in charge overseeing attendance?
- How will you pastorally deal with people acting out or ignoring safety protocols?
- How will you ensure sanitation and disinfection of church? Consider each of the following:
 - Prayer books, hymnals, order of service, etc.
 - Areas where small groups gather during the week.
 - Nurseries and/or playgrounds.
 - Pews or chairs before and after worship. Doorknobs, bathrooms, and other areas that people touch when in your building.
 - The necessary supplies to disinfect your church and where to find such things as hand sanitizer and/or masks to people who enter the building.
- Does it make sense to continue having small groups meet online rather than in person?

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- How can outreach or community activities take place that meet appropriate health guidelines?
 - If someone contracts COVID-19, how will you communicate with your congregation and members who may have come into contact with that individual while still maintaining privacy and pastoral care? How will you know who was at the event in which the contracted person was present? This information will help in contact tracing.
 - If someone who has been in your building contracts COVID-19, how will you do a more intensive cleaning prior to its next use?
 - How will you communicate your safety plan and best practices to the congregation?
 - How will you prepare your congregation in the event we experience a second wave of viral infection and need to temporarily return to more assertive forms of distancing?
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What We Hope to Do in June

It will become possible to start meeting in-person and having groups use our church buildings when local congregational leaders, together with the bishop, decide it is safe to do so. We will need to look at the context in which each congregation finds itself before making decisions.

People in each congregation will need to ascertain beforehand if the policies in effect in the congregation will make in-person worship and meetings possible. No congregation will be required to institute in-person worship until it feels prepared to do so.

Some congregations, particularly in urban areas, may want to work with other nearby congregations to implement a coordinated reopening. If this is the case, those congregations need to work with the diocesan office for the coordinated response.

Please remember that how and when to reopen will depend in large part on public health guidelines in effect at the time and the success, or lack of it, in overcoming the pandemic. Estimates of infection, illness, and death change from week to week, making it impossible to give precise dates in early May 2020 on when churches can reopen. But we will do so as soon as we feel confident that reopening is the right thing to do for our spiritual and physical health.
