

Grace Church COVID19 Virus Response Info and Update

March 14, 2020

(PLEASE READ ENTIRE LETTER!!!)

Hello all friends and members of Grace Church in Old Saybrook,

I hope this finds you all safe and well. Thank you to so many of you for your thoughts and input as I have worked to discern the future of our Sunday services at this difficult time. As you can imagine there are a lot of quickly evolving concerns and decisions being made across our communities and churches at this time in relation to the covid19 virus. I have been constantly reading news and speaking with and listening to thoughts and opinions on this issue, and I think that I, like most of you, am up to date with most of the risk assessment. I hope you know that the decisions that I am making have not been easy in the least, and that they may change in the coming weeks. Going forward, it is my intentional goal to both honor our call to worship and community while also mitigating any risks as much as possible. I believe that God has called His church to be a sanctuary, a place of rest and refreshment especially in times of darkness and trouble. We will work our hardest to live into that call while protecting ourselves as best we can. Let us be faithful but unafraid, wise as serpents and peaceful as doves.

UPDATE WORSHIP SERVICE NOTICE

Through a difficult time of prayer, reflection and discernment, along with the input of your vestry and many volunteers, I have decided that **WE WILL HAVE SERVICES TOMORROW SUNDAY MARCH 15**. And at this point the intention is to stay open moving forward...However...**We will assess following Sunday service decisions on a week to week basis**, so keep an eye out for emails. **We will however CANCEL THE WEDNESDAY HEALING service for the foreseeable future.**

In light of the health concerns and risks, and seeking to minimize risks to a bare minimum, as of tomorrow I have released ALL Sunday service ministries and their volunteers from service. That means **the only people at this time who will have an active part in Sunday liturgical acts will be myself and Christy**, who shared her willingness to provide the music for worship. As she is basically by herself at the organ anyway, she accepts the safety of her safe space there. Be assured this measure is not to be a reflection on anyone from the parish or their willingness to serve or not. I do not make this decision lightly, but in the hope to remove any possible compelling feeling to serve when not feeling comfortable or any sense of guilt from anyone who may have chosen not to serve in the face of their own conscience. Also, again, I made this decision to work to minimize any risk of possible virus transmission.

This means that **until future notice, I will no longer be seeking the assistance of ANY LECTORS, ACOLYTES, EUCHARISTIC MINISTERS, USHERS, FLOWER DELIVERERS, CHOIR, ALTAR GUILD, PRAYER TEAM, SUNDAY SCHOOL TEAM and COFFEE HOUR TEAM**. For the foreseeable future as long as we have services, I intend

to fulfill ALL the obligations of the various Sunday ministries. This also means that if you choose to come to church and want to serve anyway...I will say **NO**.

In addition to releasing ministry volunteer, you can guess there will be some **modifications to the service** this Sunday, and any other we may meet. These will be noted in chronological order as if you had arrived at church.

1. Upon arrival at church you will note a large sign welcoming you and reminding you that we will absolutely be seeking to worship together as safely as possible.
2. You will be asked to take time upon arrival to use the bathrooms to **wash hands thoroughly and/or use hand sanitizer BEFORE sitting in pews**. We will start a little late to allow for this.
3. You will also note that the bulletins and the offering plate will be on a table at the back and front of the church. Please take your own bulletin, and if you are seeking to give offering/pledge you can place it in the plate before or after service, or during the time I am setting the table for Communion. We also gently remind everyone that the business of the church must still continue in the midst of all of what is going on, so if you aren't able to come to church on Sunday, please consider still giving either by mail or dropping off at church in the mailbox.
4. When seeking a pew...please note that health officials are recommending **at least 6-8 feet of "social distancing space"** to lower possible spread of any virus. So...please make sure you find a pew spot with distance between you and others. And yes...you may have to sit in a pew you don't normally sit in! Oh, the adventure!
5. **During the PEACE**. During the peace I ask that all who attend stay where they are and only greet one another from a distance with hellos, nods or peace signs. Please do not move into other spaces or try to shake hands. Again, the social distancing is key.
6. **HOLY COMMUNION and Blessing**: I will modify the distribution of Communion from what we did last week. Since I will not have acolytes or eucharistic ministers, I will be offering communion alone. Holy Communion will be offered to all who **CHOOSE** to take it standing up in front of the baptismal font. (please note you may opt out of communion!) Also, **ONLY** the bread (wafer) will be offered for the foreseeable future. **WE WILL NOT BE OFFERING THE COMMON CUP FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE**. Standing, instead of kneeling, and offering only the wafer decreases more contact issues during the communion itself. I will ask that all people who choose to receive the wafer come up slowly in **ONE** line starting from the back of the church and working again to **keep at least 6-8 feet distance between each person**. I will **NOT** be saying individual words as you receive, instead they will be offered for the whole church from the altar. I will remain silent and drop the wafer in your hand, and you can proceed to whatever side you need to return to. There also won't be volunteers offering private close contact prayers following Holy Communion at the 10am service. If you need special prayers, please either let me know, or contact someone from the prayer team by email or phone.
7. At the end of the service I ask that you please leave your bulletin where you were sitting, or if you choose to take your bulletin, grab an offering envelope from the pew rack and place it where you sat. This will allow us to offer special cleaning attention to those areas where we know people have been sitting. FYI...Sherry, our sexton,

- will be (and has been) cleaning all doors and rails/pews a couple times a week, especially before and after Sunday.
8. After service is over, I know many of you like to catch up and check in. I ask that for both services (no coffee hour at 10am remember) that if you want to engage in conversation you first politely ask and set boundaries of space and permission to engage. You may even want to catch up outside of the sanctuary, either way, remember to give one another space.

In addition to releasing ministry volunteers from service there are also several programs and parts of Sunday service which will be cancelled or modified.

TO BE CANCELLED...AT GRACE CHUCH (SO FAR)

- On Sunday, COFFEE HOUR and SUNDAY SCHOOL are both cancelled for the foreseeable future.
- Wednesday Healings services cancelled for foreseeable future.
- During the week both the Women of Grace and Friday Men's Bible study have been cancelled until further notice. The Lenten teaching/dinner series and the upcoming Men's Breakfast are also to be cancelled.
- I will be in conversation with Vestry this week to discuss how to proceed with vestry, but I foresee at the least modifying are meetings in some new format.

TO BE CANCELLED...OTHER ORGANIZATIONS AT GRACE (SO FAR)

- Once a month Early Head Start gathering
- Common Good Gardens Brunch 3/21
- Social Services Help Day and CT Food Bank Truck 3/26. I have been in touch with Sue Consoli about the needs this day provides, and she assures me they are creating new ways to help those in need. More info to come
- Wednesday SSKP community meal temporarily cancelled. Pantries will remain open (First Church) with to-go bags of food. More info to come...
- I have also been in touch with Boy Scouts and am waiting for their schedule.
- I also have to hear from AA and DBSA...no word yet on either. However, they will have access to the building if they want to continue meeting.

PRECAUTIONS

- As noted above our church will be kept constantly clean by our sexton, with the added suggestions of hand washing with soap or sanitizer, as well as social distancing space while we are together. I also intend to open windows during the week for fresh air.
- With the removal of ALL ministry volunteers, I have worked to reduce the number of hands that touch anything that you might touch to a bare minimum, in most cases just I will be in contact with things. I literally can't tell you how many times my hands will be washed each Sunday, but it will be a lot. In addition, as many know, when the priest at Grace Church washes their hands prior to communion, we do it with rubbing alcohol.

This is another reason why reducing the other hands, removing the cup and only having me touch the wafer is the best solution I can offer while also maintaining the integrity of the sacrament itself. The Church teaches, by the way, that the bread by itself is sufficient to maintain the sacrament itself.

- Though I am aware that we can't fully protect the church from all possible contamination, I believe that all these measures will assist in bringing risks down to a bare minimum.
- **DO YOU COME TO CHURCH?** This is totally your choice, and I hope those who do come know the risks. I think you know I am making the most extreme effort possible to continue service yet also maintain safety as much as we can. Those who come will be asked to have washed hands or sanitized either before they come or after arriving, we can start a little late to accommodate this need. Those who attend will also be asked to spread out with at least 6 feet between worshipers. However please be mindful of the continuing risk factors: ACCORDING TO HEALTH OFFICIALS IF YOU ARE SICK, OVER 60 OR IMMUNE SUPPRESSED, YOU SHOULD NOT COME TO CHURCH. If you are hesitant to come to church for any variety of reasons, then feel free not to attend church. Please do not feel compelled, judged or guilty about not coming to church for any reason in the next few weeks or beyond. I know you all love the Lord Jesus and Grace Church, I understand your caution and convictions as your own. Either way I will respect your decisions NO MATTER what they are founded on. I ask others to respect others decisions as well.

OPTIONS FOR THOSE WHO AREN'T AT SUNDAY WORSHIP SERVICE

- I intend to offer a variety of options to engage in worship if for whatever reason you don't make it to church.
- I will be working with some of our parish to create an on-line live service, probably on FaceBook. In addition, I will also be looking into recording and adding it to YouTube. We will also, as normal, have **sermons** available on our website **graceoldsaybrook.org**
- If any of you would like, or need, private visits for prayer, communion, anointing or anything else, please contact me.
- Also, I am open to very small gatherings of a few people or families to get together for morning or evening prayer, with or without communion. If this is something you are interested in in the next few weeks let me know.

OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER IN THE COMING WEEKS

- We are still the Church! That means that we are to be led in our hearts by love and hope, not fear. Filled with peace and wisdom, not anger or hatred.
- We can all continue to pray without ceasing for each other, our church, the community, the nation and the world. And then...pray some more.
- There are several members of our church community and beyond in our at-large community who may come into various hardships in the time to come. It will be our duty in love to serve those who need help. The church will be available to help in a variety of ways, with some various resources. I also plan to have a team of volunteers able to help

people get rides and groceries if need be. If you or someone you know is in need of something, please let the church know so we can help to try coordinate assistance.

- If you or someone you know gets tested positive for the virus...let us know ASAP!

Within this newsletter you will be able to view the letter and recommendations from the bishops of our diocese. You will note that they make a few notes: that the authority to make decisions on Sunday services is within the hands of the priest of each parish. They “suggest” closing parishes for two weeks and then reassessing. And they “suggest” that if you do remain open, to dispense with the common cup. Having read my decision, you will note that I have come in between their suggestions, removing the cup and continuing services. I do not make these decisions in any way to dismiss the diocese, but with their suggestions and yours in mind, while still working to honor God’s call to His church to worship and pray, as well as also seeking to minimize risks...all at the same time! I will be in touch with diocesan leadership to inform them of my decision, so that they are aware of what we intend.

In closing, I am also aware that my decision will not please everyone. I am aware of the risks that we are taking, and I believe so do all the people who will attend church. I am also very open to evolving our service situation in the week or two to come if necessary. If you have any issues, concerns or problems, as always...I am here to listen, to pray with you and to point to Jesus. Know that I make these difficult decisions in the end because I believe that God has called His church at Grace to be a sanctuary and place of refreshment, most especially in dark and stormy times. We are in those times, and thus Grace Church will as long as is able, remain open on Sundays, working to minimize risks to a bare minimum, and yet continuing to provide the solace and communal space for those who need it to gather.

I think this covers just about everything I can think of, if I have missed anything please let me. I ask urgently for your patience, mercy, grace and prayers for me and the church as we move forward. If you have any serious problems in the coming weeks or know anyone who does, please let me know. May the grace and peace of God be with you all, may the Holy Spirit be with us all in healing and Truth...

In Christ,

Charlie Hamill

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