

Caring for Congregations in The Midst of The Pandemic

Caring for congregations in the midst of this pandemic is quite challenging. We, as spiritual leaders are searching to find new ways to Be the Church and care for one another as a community of God's faithful people. As you look for new ways to provide worship opportunities while the body of Christ cannot gather in person, we are also mindful of the pastoral care needs and how we may need to do this differently than we have up until this point.

Here are some suggestions to consider:

Funerals and internments

Funeral homes in Wisconsin are now following the guideline issued by the governor and in recommendation with the CDC, which is that any gathering should be limited to ten people. We recognize that when someone dies to this earthly life, people gather in groups much larger to support one another, to share our grief, our memories and to celebrate the life of our beloved family member, friend, colleague or co-worker. In this time, we are recommending that you do not do gather for services. It may be best to hold a graveside service with immediate family of no more than ten people and ask people to honor their loved one at a later time. Then gather a larger group later once the pandemic has passed to hold a memorial service celebrating the life they lived.

Service preparations can still be done online or over the phone. If you have the capability to conduct a virtual meeting with family members on line, that is a great option. Have them share their stories about their loved one, talk about what scripture and songs are meaningful to them, offer your care and counsel, but do so virtually. If you have capability to Zoom or Skype, it's a great way to gather the community. It may be you need to have one on one phone conversations. Some pastors are asking family to write a farewell letter to their loved one and have them share those at the graveside or saving them to be shared at a later memorial.

Weddings

Many couples are choosing to postpone weddings that were scheduled during this time. Others are choosing to have their pastor marry them with only a handful of family or friends gathered while practicing social distancing. And some are choosing to legally marry but hold the religious service and celebration at a later date. The mandate to only gather with no more that 10 people does help shape our choices.

Baptisms

We recommend that, if possible, all baptisms be postponed until we can once again gather face to face as a community of faith. That said, there are a few pastors who are choosing to offer baptisms online with the parents of the child (ren) carrying out the acts of baptism as the pastor offers the liturgy. But, given this is a service in our tradition where the gathered community makes promises alongside the parents to support and nurture the child in the Christian faith, it's best to celebrate this sacrament with the community present. If, you are going to offer baptisms on-line, maybe one or more church members be represented in that virtual gathering to be a part of the service.

We also realize that some of you may be called into hospital settings to baptize children and we trust that hospital health protocols will need to be observed in the process (masks, gloves, gowns and use of sterile water for the baptism.)

Care and Counseling

We are so used to supporting one another in personal ways, that it is hard to conceive of offering care without being able to offer an assuring touch on the shoulder or holding their hand when praying with them. We can still convey calm, comfort, assurance, peace and love, just with the sound of our voice. We can still listen in love and pastorally attend to their needs. We can still offer prayer and scripture and song to our congregations. And we can continue to calm and hope to our members in the midst of this crisis. It may be that we reach out with online messages. It may be we make personal phone calls. Even in the hospital most patients are able to receive a phone call, even it means a staff member holds the phone to their ear.

Most elder care facilities and many area hospitals are now closed to all visitors. There may be in-house chaplain available, but we will need to place phone calls and concentrate our efforts on supporting family members. In terms of home bound parishioners, phone calls are recommended so that we don't put elders at risk. If you must make a personal visit, we recommend extreme caution and distance.

It may also mean that we go old school and create prayer chains and phone trees in the community to help people stay in touch with one another. Or perhaps a team of people write cards and letters to one another to let people know they are appreciated and not forgotten. Some churches are establishing pen pals between older members and young children helping to connect and build relationships with one another.

We have lots of ways to connect and care for one another, let's get creative and figure out new ways to Be the Church.