

St. John's Episcopal Church
Pandemic Response and Recovery
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Looking Back -- 2021

At first glance, the beginning of 2021 looked a whole lot like 2020. Yes, we had moved our worship services from the chapel back into the church building, but we were still entirely online with very limited staff present to conduct the services and operate the equipment needed for online transmission. The City of Austin was in the midst of a major surge in infections, hospitalizations, and, most sadly, deaths from the COVID-19 virus.

Even in those dark days, however, some good things were starting to happen:

- The St. John's community held together! Despite being isolated and almost exclusively online, we had reasonably good viewership for our online services, and we had found ways to support online fellowship and learning. Zoom Online Meetings allowed us to hold Christian Formation classes and virtual "coffee hours" after the services.
- Long-awaited vaccines were starting to become available, and they were proving to be very effective against the virus. As more people were vaccinated, we became more confident that someday we could carefully and safely regather in-person.
- We could once again use the organ, and pre-recording music allowed our musicians to contribute their talents and greatly enhance our worship services.
- We acquired several hospital-grade air filters to circulate and clean the air inside the church building and parish hall.
- And, most important, Mother Minerva had arrived, bringing her energy and enthusiasm, and challenging us to find more ways to develop and enhance our worship and service to each other.

One of Mother Minerva's first suggestions was that we move to using Zoom as our platform for online worship services; throughout 2020 we had been using Facebook Live and YouTube. Suddenly, instead of having online viewers, we had online participants in our services. People could read the lessons remotely, and members of the choir could sing remotely. We were starting to become a congregation again.

In the spring, as the COVID infection rates began declining, we started holding online morning prayer services inside the church and in-person Holy Eucharist services outside in the parking lot. We bolted wheels onto our portable altar and other fixtures to make it easier to move things around. Simultaneously, we worked on organizing things in the church building to support moving back to indoor in-person worship. This included installing some new cameras and video switching equipment, and connecting our new systems to the existing sound system. By specifying certain pews for seating and installing plexiglass barriers where appropriate, we were able to maximize our seating while observing safe social distancing.

It rained on Easter morning. Although we had started setting up outside, we quickly determined that Mother Nature would have her way. All agreed "We can't cancel EASTER!" We worked together to

figure out how to move the Easter services into the church. Things weren't perfect, but it was so wonderful that our first services in the church after the long absence were EASTER! Over the next few weeks, we refined our processes for safely holding services in the church building while still supporting remote participation. The new buzzword was "hybrid services." On the Day of Pentecost, we resumed our customary schedule of three Holy Eucharist services each Sunday.

Throughout the rest of 2021, we refined our safety protocols for worship services and other activities at St. John's. The plexiglass came down, went back up, and came down again. Coffee was served outdoors, indoors in the parish hall, or not at all. In-person small groups could once again meet in the Parish Hall. Elements of the worship services that we had minimized to manage the time we spent together were restored. While being as proactive as possible, we remained very responsive to CDC and governmental recommendations on how to safely do church during this pandemic.

As a result of the attention we have, as a congregation, paid to keeping each other safe and healthy while maintaining worship and fellowship at as high a level as possible, we had a very successful year!

Looking Forward – 2022

As we move into 2022, once again our City is in the midst of a major surge in infections and hospitalizations with the latest variant of the COVID-19 virus. This time, however, we believe that we see light at the end of the tunnel, and we are working to find a "new normal" for St. John's.

Here is what we expect for our Worship Services:

- Masks will still be required for indoor worship services. This may eventually relax when virus conditions improve.
- We will continue to have at least one worship service each week that is "hybrid" with both in-person and remote participation.
- Many of the pews will be blocked off to help ensure social distancing. As conditions improve, more seating in the Church will be opened.
- We will continue to celebrate the Holy Eucharist, but only bread will be distributed. We are investigating ways of safely resuming wine distribution during communion.
- We will have music and a choir at the 10:30 AM and 1:00 PM services, but our music may be somewhat limited until conditions improve. The Praise Band will occasionally perform.
- We have begun using the BCP/LOC for the in-person services, and we will expand this to resume using the various hymnals. The books will go back into the pew racks! Online and Hybrid services will continue to use single-use printed or downloadable bulletins while we investigate other systems to support in-person and remote participation.
- There will be other changes, but these are the ones that are most visible. As conditions improve, we will strive to get closer and closer to the "new normal."

And here is what we expect for other activities at St. John's:

- Masks will initially remain required for any indoor activities. As conditions improve, we will relax this requirement.

- Selected Christian Formation classes will gather in-person. As much as possible, we will continue to offer hybrid or remote access to Christian Formation classes.
- We will continue to offer recorded replay of many services and sermons and selected Christian Formation classes.
- As conditions improve, we will resume use of the parish hall for selected fellowship activities such as coffee hours and small group meetings. We will eventually “break bread” together but serving food will likely have to remain outside and subject to the whims of the weather for a while.

The Pandemic has taught us just how important communications are, and we will continue to use the tools that we started using in 2020 and that have continued to serve us well during 2021. You will continue to see The Bridge and El Puente newsletters, and we will continue to enhance our web sites. Our Facebook presence will remain an important place for communication and online fellowship. We will continue to provide plain text materials for the visually impaired, and we will continue to use things like text messaging for folks who don't have email or Facebook accounts. We'll even continue to use the US Mail where appropriate.

We appreciate your support, we appreciate your patience, and we really look forward to the day when we can find our “new normal.”