

St. John's Episcopal Church
Pandemic Response and Recovery
Bill Cox and Fay Jones

Looking Back -- 2020

The COVID19 Pandemic of 2020 forced major changes to the way we worship, communicate, and have fellowship within the St. John's family. We started 2020 worshipping together as usual. That all changed abruptly in March, as we conducted our final in-person services in the church on March 15. Starting March 22, we retreated to the Chapel, reset to only one English language service and one Spanish language service, and began transmitting our services via Facebook live. The first online services were very simple---no music and only Rev. Ann and Bill Cox physically present. Bill's early attempts to say the Spanish language responses were particularly unfortunate. We failed a lot and learned a lot those first few weeks and eventually we settled on the Morning Prayer liturgy, were able to restore music to the services, and add a small crew of lay readers for both languages.

In May, we optimistically began planning our return to in person worship in the Church. This has proven to be a living document, and we are currently on our thirteenth iteration of that plan. Also in May, we began using the Zoom online meeting system to restart some of our Christian Education classes. Eventually, we restarted our virtual online "coffee hour" after the English language services. In November, we moved from the Chapel back into the church for our online worship services and this gave us the opportunity to resume using our lovely pipe organ in the services.

In September, as the COVID infection rates appeared to be declining, we restarted a very simple outdoor Holy Eucharist service, alternating between English and Spanish. Unfortunately, as COVID began surging again in December, we have had to discontinue these outdoor services.

COVID19 has also strongly affected the way we communicate with our parish family. Since we were no longer in the church, we no longer had Books of Common Prayer and Hymnals available. This meant that our service bulletins had to be modified to include the full service, all readings, and all music in the bulletin.

Our monthly Parish newsletter had been dormant since 2016 and we relied on email and announcements in church to promulgate news and information. When the pandemic forced suspension of our in-person services and meetings, it became critical for us to reach out to parishioners and friends on a regular and systematic basis. We started using the Constant Contact bulk email system to produce and distribute weekly newsletters: "The Bridge" and "El Puente." Since we began using Constant Contact, we have an overall 48% open rate for our blast emails---this is actually quite good for this form of communication. We continue to use Constant Contact for weekly newsletters, Christian Education reminders, and small group activities.

Looking Forward – 2021

As we move into 2021, we do see light at the end of the tunnel. We are certain that we WILL return to in-person worship in the Church, and we WILL return to using the Parish Hall for meetings and fellowship. Unfortunately, WHEN we will do so is largely outside our control.

We WILL NOT return to in-person activities until it is safe to do so.

As noted above, we have been planning HOW to return to in-person activities safely. That plan has evolved over the past several months, and we are currently on our 13th revision since the plan was first sent to Bishop Ryan's office for review and approval. Here are some of the highlights of what you will see when we first return to in-person worship:

- First and foremost, we will continue to offer online access to our services.
- We will ask you to sign up to come to a service in person, just like we did for the outdoor services last fall. At first, we will have relatively few seats available for each service. The number of seats will increase as conditions in Austin improve.
- Masks will be required. Hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes will be plentiful. You'll see plexiglass barriers in a few places.
- Many of the pews will be blocked off, and the pews that remain "open" will have limited seating. This is to help ensure social distancing. We apologize in advance if you find a red "please do not sit here" card in the pew where you used to sit.
- We will celebrate the Holy Eucharist, but at first, only bread will be distributed.
- We won't have a full choir until conditions improve, but there will be beautiful music performed by soloists and small groups just like we have in our current Zoom meeting services.
- We won't use the Books of Common Prayer or Hymnals; instead we will have single-use printed bulletins similar to the bulletins you now download from the web site or Facebook
- 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 a new version of "normal."

The Pandemic has taught us just how important communications are, and we will continue to use the tools that have served us the past several months. You will continue to see The Bridge and El Puente newsletters, and we will continue to use Facebook and our web sites. We're working on a "hybrid" approach for using Zoom to support meetings where some are present at the church while others attend remotely. 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 accounts. We'll even continue to use the US Mail where needed.

We appreciate your support, we appreciate your patience, and we really look forward to the day when we can again gather together to worship and serve!