

Worship, Sacrament, and Related matters

In general: see this resource for guidelines from the ELCA Worship Office--
"Worship in Times of Public Health Concerns"

Online Communion?

In cases of virtual worship gatherings, the sacrament of Holy Communion is not to be celebrated. "The Use of the Means of Grace" reminds us that Holy Communion takes place in the assembly (Principle 39). Even in times when a community cannot gather to share the sacrament, Jesus shows up, and we are still part of the body of Christ.

Alternative date for Easter? The date of Easter is not ours to set. Holy Week and Easter services should be provided for in an alternative manner as all other worship services. What a congregation may consider doing is setting a later date for celebrating resurrection--perhaps along with a service of thanksgiving for the passing (or lessening) of the pandemic. Such a worship could feature all of the elements of an Easter worship. But it is not an alternative date of Easter--particularly as we don't yet know for certain when we'll be able to gather again for public worship.

Funerals in a time of limited gatherings: preliminary work is important--teaching/guiding others in a time of grief is difficult enough. Consider the following:

What is your local funeral home doing? You can only work with what they're willing to do. Have a conversation with them about how you and they will together handle needs in the weeks ahead.

Offer to be the host--or learn now who can be the host--for online planning of a service. There may be out-of-town loved ones who will be limited in travel. Help the family to keep them all in the conversation even if they can't gather in person to plan.

Option 1: suggest a private graveside service now, and a memorial service at a later date (but be aware that there will be scheduling impacts down the road). This honors the limit on gathering, provides an initial means for loved ones for formalize/ritualize grief, tends to immediate needs for safe handling of remains, and lets elderly or medically fragile individuals attend a service later when it's safer.

Option 2: work with the funeral home to determine how to have a limited-attendance service (in their chapel or your worship (or gathering space) and make sure it's live-streamed for others to "attend." Make sure the service is recorded--it's easy to do and it's available for loved ones to share whether or not they can 'tune in' live. Determine how you'll honor the 10-person limit. Could 25 family members, for example, spread out in the sanctuary (or the building) to limit contact?

Option 3: postpone everything until it's safe to gather in larger groups again. This has happened from time to time when flooding prevented burials for long periods of time, e.g. But this can be hard on a family--and funeral homes (or health authorities) may resist, not knowing what the impact of the virus will be or how its mortality will stress the system.

Great care will need to be taken and even greater pastoral sensitivity than usual will need to be shown to families dealing with a loved one who is near death, through the dying process, and beyond. Be sure to be in conversation with lay leadership before decisions need to be made so that they can raise questions you may not have considered, and so that you have their support for responsible practices.

Weddings in a time of limited gatherings: be in touch with all couples who have weddings scheduled for the next three months to let them know you're attuned to their concerns--and to put some boundaries on when and how decisions will be made. June couples take back seat to April couples. Most of the decisions that need to be made fall on them. You need to be available to provide pastoral support, calm, and creativity for the ceremony. They might consider:

Getting married by you or a civil authority on the date listed on their marriage license, and planning to celebrate via the rite for Prayer and Blessing after a Civil Marriage (adapted appropriately if the marriage was presided over by clergy). This is a way of postponing the 'celebration' without postponing the marriage.

Drastically reducing the number of participants and live-streaming the planned ceremony.
Postponing everything until the situation changes.

Care should be taken to properly return marriage licenses already issued--even if the marriage is postponed (check instructions issued with the license to determine timeframes and deadlines).