

A PLAN & A PROCESS TO  
BEGIN RE-GATHERING:  
ISSUED JUNE, 2020

First Baptist Church  
Bar Harbor, Maine

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To Our Family, First Baptist Church Bar Harbor, Maine:

This time last year, my family was preparing to visit Bar Harbor for the first time. I opened God's Word for the first time in front of our church family on Father's Day of 2019. As we considered God's Sovereignty in bringing us this far, we hoped and prayed this would be home. I don't know if "overjoyed" accurately describes how glad we were when we found out that you were now our family; because God knitted our hearts to you immediately.

You could have told me that a plethora of possibilities would arise in this first year here. Most understandable and believable, but I would never have believed this: that nearly one year later, we would be Re-Gathering for the first time in 3 months, after being suspended because of a worldwide health pandemic. But additionally, I would not have believed that God would use an event such as this to make us love and miss this church family even more.

It is interesting how that works, isn't it? They say that "*absence makes the heart grow fonder.*" It's so true. Moriah and I both have a deep love for the local church. Moriah came by it honestly from her family who had her in church every Sunday from conception. I came by it through a recognition that the church had good news and truth for my questioning soul as a college student.

We have always prioritized Sunday mornings. Whether I was serving on a church staff, or as a pastor, or as a regular church member, Moriah, Miciah, Jude and I have always centered our week around Sunday Morning. The Sunday morning gathering has been the most important event of our week.

We have always prioritized gathering together with God's people to hear truth from God's Word, sing, pray, observe the Lord's Supper and Baptism, and be strengthened by the members. No matter where we have been, this picture of Sunday morning is consistent: Gathering with God's people; hearing the Bible read; hearing God's Word taught; hearing the gospel proclaimed; seeing the Ordinances; loving, and being loved by the members; seeing smiling faces; feeling the warm embrace of a hug or a handshake; feeling and seeing tears stream down faces; tasting a warm cup of coffee or a morning snack like a blueberry cinnamon roll; and scattering back home with a sense of awe, wonder, joy, contentment, and overwhelming satisfaction that is unparalleled to anything this world offers.

This is a small glimpse into a regular Sunday morning gathering at Bar Harbor First Baptist Church.

While I would love to say, "*Hey, we are Re-Gathering to have church again on Sunday June 21<sup>st</sup>!*" This simply is just not the case. Because gathering as we did 4 months ago, is not feasible nor likely again for some time. We will gather on June 21<sup>st</sup>, but it will not be the same.

One of the greatest struggles of constructing Re-Gathering plans and procedures is that we desire to recapture church as it was before COVID19. And while we could try to do that; it seems misleading because this is not an ordinary time, nor will this be a return to normalcy. To prepare like it is ignores the reality around us.

So, just to make sure we are prepared as we begin the process of Re-Gathering: Sunday will not

be like it was. And we are going to go with it! We are going to embrace the different time, and try to accentuate the strangeness. I explain this in section 2. C, page 4.

## 1. Preliminary Considerations

Some overall thoughts that are helpful to consider are:

- Please extend extra grace to me as Pastor, and your deacons during this time.
- We readily admit that we don't know how these plans will work, or if they will work, or if they are best; we have been and are still trying to figure this out just like everyone else.
- There is not one right way to begin regathering safely.
- There is only one wrong way to Re-Gather, which is to pretend COVID19 isn't real and that it doesn't matter.
- We cannot ensure the safety of anyone, nor have we ever been able to ensure safety; risk is involved in every decision we make on a daily basis.<sup>1</sup>
- We will continue to offer the online option for livestream during this time.
- This is perhaps, and hopefully the only time you will ever hear a pastor say: *Right now, you have permission to remain at home on Sunday mornings!*
- If you are at all uneasy about being in larger crowds, please remain at home!
- I will say it again: if you are apprehensive to be in this setting, then please remain at home! It is completely understandable, and encouraged if you are hesitant!
- We plan to livestream on Sunday morning at 10:30am, as long as technology cooperates, although the quality might be somewhat diminished.
- A livestream will be available on our YouTube channel.
- Lastly, we recognize that now is the time to begin implementing a staged approach to Re-Gathering, because there will never be a good time.

## 2. A Plan for Re-Gathering Phase 1: What Will Be Missing?

In an effort to reduce items that are regularly touched, and minimize community transmission of

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<sup>1</sup> On June 12, 2020, The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) presented a document entitled: *Considerations for Events & Gatherings*. When referring to events or gatherings, the word "risk" is involved no matter the situation. The levels of risk are certainly higher and lower in different situations. "Lowest risk," "More risk," "Higher risk," and "Highest risk" are the four levels mentioned by the CDC. Even the "Lowest risk" which involves "virtual-only activities, events, and gatherings" is still labeled a "risk" because the CDC recognizes that no one is completely safe anywhere on this earth. There is inherent risk involved with living in a fallen world ravaged with sin and death. Further, the CDC provided recommendations in a document entitled *Face Coverings* (Issued May, 23 2020). It notes that even face coverings are not completely effective highlighting the possibility of still being infected despite whatever precautions made: "Your cloth face covering *may* protect them. Their cloth face covering *may* protect you."

Likewise, Walt Disney World (WDW) recognizes the inherent risk involved in gatherings and events. WDW issued a COVID19 statement entitled *Update on Walt Disney World Resort Operations—Including Theme Parks and Water Parks*. The document states clearly: "An inherent risk of exposure to COVID-19 exists in any public setting where people are present. COVID-19 is an extremely contagious disease that can lead to severe illness and death. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, senior citizens and guests with underlying medical conditions are especially vulnerable. By visiting Walt Disney World Resort, you voluntarily assume all risks related to exposure to COVID-19."

germs, we will be implementing these parameters in order to begin the process of Re-Gathering:

**A. Typical Things Absent:**

- No coffee, snacks, or Fellowship Hour.
- No Sunday school.
- No children's church.
- No nursery or childcare (children are welcomed at the gathering; and we assume they will make noise and be fidgety!).
- No pew Bibles or hymnals will be available under the seats (bring your own Bible!).
- No offering plates will be passed (the offering box is hanging up beside the entryway into the gathering space).
- No guest cards, prayer cards, or tithe envelopes will be available in seat back pockets.
- No printed bulletins (we hope to begin offering a digital bulletin instead).
- No Lord's Supper or Baptisms.
- No access to fellowship hall, or downstairs classrooms and downstairs restrooms.

**B. Restroom Availability:**

- The upstairs restrooms in the foyer will be available for usage.
- Each restroom will be cleaned after every usage.

**C. A Different Setting For Sunday Morning:**

Some intentional changes you will notice as we begin Re-Gathering in Phase 1 are:

- The room and seating will be configured differently for an intentionally different look and in order to maintain at least 6 feet for social distancing.
- There will be no pulpit.
- The teaching will be somewhat different, more like a Bible study or Sunday School (although I can't promise not to preach).
- I will dress more casual and comfortable, maybe sometimes wearing shorts (especially if it is hot) or a hat (if it is windy); and we encourage you to dress with the weather.
- I might sit on stool and not stand, will not be standing on the stage.
- We will not have a time of congregational singing for the time being.
- We aim for the duration of this meeting to be about 30-45 minutes.
- Lastly, we will not be calling it "church" because in the full biblical sense it is not.

All of this is on purpose to allow us to grieve and recognize the abnormality. We are going to go with the strangeness, since it won't really be "church" for a little while longer until that day when we can all meet together with little to no restrictions, Lord Willing sometime soon!

It was suggested by a member to call it "**Not Quite church**;" and we will go with that. We won't be able to all assemble together at one time in one place for the event that is our corporate gathering. Since there is no congregational singing, no Lord's Supper, no Baptisms, no hugging, some covered smiling faces, and with many members at home; it is not quite church. We will accept it, and embrace it.

### **3. The Process: What Will Sunday Be Like?**

#### **A. Simple Sunday: Prayer and God's Word**

Sunday morning will consist of Prayer, Bible reading, Bible teaching, and outside fellowship at your comfort and discretion.

- The one speaking will likely speak, as is common practice among public speakers during this time, without a face covering.
- There will at least 12-15 feet between the speaker and any seats.
- A plexiglass shield will be in front of the speaker.

#### **B. Process for Sunday Morning:**

- For the time being, we will continue livestreaming the teaching at 10:30am on Sunday morning for those who remain at home.
- We will begin with one gathering at 10:30am on Sunday Morning.
- We will also consider a second service based upon need which will be evaluated on a regular basis.
- Attendance is limited to no more than 50 people.
- Seating will be reconfigured to adequately maintain at least 6 feet of distance between each attendee and party.
- Seating will be available outside as well (you might or might not be able to see me through the window or with the use of a screen).
- If you feel more comfortable sitting outside, feel free to bring your own lawn chair;
- We will also provide some chairs for you to sit in outside.
- We hope to have an area of outside seating available with a covered tent.
- When/If the capacity nears 50 inside the building, we encourage some of our able men members to exit the building to be hospitable and prioritize seating for our guests, visitors, women and children members/attendees.
- All the windows will be open for airflow with fans on (dress accordingly!).
- The only point of entry will be the side door with the wheelchair ramp.
- This door will be propped open to ensure touchless entry.
- We will have an orderly process for entering the building, and for seating.
- Access and entry will have a queuing system in place with yellow lines marking 6 feet of distance.
- Please know the total number in your party and enter together.
- You will be assigned a specific row, with a specific chair number to ensure 6 feet of social distance.
- We will direct you inside the building to help you to your specific seats.
- You will be encouraged to follow the white lines on the floor to your row and seats which will keep 6 feet of social distance between you and other attendees.
- The row and seat numbers will be visible.
- You will be dismissed in an orderly fashion out the front door in order to limit congregating, and ensure social distance as we exit.

- You will be dismissed row by row.
- The tithe and offering box is hanging next to the door entry into the gathering space.
- We have installed touchless hand sanitizing stations throughout the building.
- We hope to maintain continual traffic flow inside the building to your seat, and back outside once you are formally dismissed.
- We ask that you avoid congregating inside and outside; instead, we ask you to visit and fellowship outside in the parking lot and sidewalk after you have exited the building.
- I will be outside to see you and visit after everyone has exited the building.
- Pastor Justin is the most at risk person on Sunday morning due to the high volume of person to person interaction; please be mindful of him.
- We will thoroughly clean the building after each usage.
- The Munro's will be providing music to sing on your way home, or when you get home.
- This music will be recorded and posted on our YouTube channel.
- This plan bridges together what we are doing now (all-online), with where we hope to be sometime in the future when we can gather again less hindered by restrictions.

### **C. An “Encourage” Not “Mandate” Policy**

We are implementing a practical “encourage” not “mandate” policy.  
We are required by the State of Maine to:

1. Encourage Social Distancing.
2. Limit a gathering to 50 people.<sup>2</sup>
3. Wear face coverings when 6 feet of social distance “is difficult to maintain.”<sup>3</sup>

## **4. Additional Information Regarding Specific Policies**

### **A. Regarding Face Coverings**

So, we encourage you to wear face coverings; however, you will not be required to nor will you be turned away or ridiculed if you do or do not wear a face covering.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> “Gatherings at in-person services must not exceed the limit established by the Governor’s Executive Order.” Maine.gov *Restarting Maine’s Economy: COVID-19 Prevention Checklist Phase 1: Religious Gatherings*, (issued 5/22/2020), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. “Cloth face coverings must be worn by all attendees when physical distancing is difficult to maintain.” This phrase “difficult to maintain” seems purposefully vague. Yet, similarly, The Maine.gov “*Restarting Maine’s Economy: COVID-19 Prevention Checklist Phase 2: Large Social Gatherings*, (issued 5/20/2020), 2, suggested “Face coverings should be worn in public settings when physical distancing is not possible.” This document was written to guide large social gatherings and public or community events. Either way, with our plan and process, maintaining 6 feet of distance will not be difficult to do.

<sup>4</sup> Office of the Governor, Janet Mills, *Executive Order: 49 FY 19/20*, (issued April 29, 2020), 3. Section 5.B states: “EXPECTATIONS: Cloth face coverings are not required for children under age 2, a child in a child care setting, or for anyone who has trouble breathing or related medical conditions, or who is otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance. A person who cannot wear a cloth face covering because of a medical condition is not required to produce medical documentation of the condition.” Anyone refers to any person “irrespective of whether the person is an employee, customer, vendor, invitee, or other.” Medical conditions can refer to physical as well as psychological conditions, such as a phobia. In *Executive Order: 14 FY 19/20* (Issued March 18, 2020), and *Executive Order: 28 FY 19/20* (issued March 31, 2020), the Mills administration did not mention face coverings in

In addition, if you are the parent of a young child, we realize it is difficult, if not near impossible to keep a face covering on your child for a substantial duration of time. So please do not feel embarrassed or guilty if your child can't or won't keep a face covering on their face.

Since our gathering space is reconfigured, since we plan to enter and exit in an orderly fashion, since our seating and entry/exit plans help to maintain at least 6 feet of social distance, and since we expect most people to carefully maintain social distancing recommendations, this policy is in accordance with the requirements suggested to us.

This is also a practical policy.

We are a “come just as you are” church; and you will not be turned away for what you have or don't have on your face. I will be glad to see you just as you are.

So, this will be a non-issue on Sunday.

I, as your pastor, will not think more highly/lowly of you, or think you are more/less righteous/unrighteous either way. You are made right with God by His Grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone; not by what you wear or don't wear.

We also have a limited supply of face coverings if you happen to need one on Sunday! Just ask.

### **B. Regarding Those “At-Risk” or “Vulnerable”**

If you are in the “at-risk” or “vulnerable” category, then we encourage you to remain at home. However, you are not required to remain at home.<sup>5</sup> So, you will not be turned away or ridiculed if you do or do not choose to attend.

This will be a non-issue on Sunday.

I, as your pastor, will not think more highly/lowly of you, or think you are more/less righteous/unrighteous either way.

You are made right with God by His Grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone; not by whether you immediately attend or wait to attend by remaining at home for the time being.

Again, we will continue to offer a livestream each Sunday Morning at 10:30am for now. In addition, we are planning to provide some online and in-person Bible studies during the week. I hope to offer additional pastoral care to those of you remaining at home. I plan to go above and beyond in order to not make anyone feel guilty for remaining at home.

### **C. Regarding Hand Shakes and Hugs**

We encourage you to refrain from and avoid physical contact like hand-shaking and hugging

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their guidance; however, since Executive Order 49, “An Order to Stay Safer at Home” as it is more commonly known, the Mills administration has referenced these policies in the Executive Orders that followed.

In addition to the exceptions, if you object based on religious liberty, or governmental infringement of rights, you are free to do so as a citizen of the United States of America. Lastly, if face coverings make it difficult for you to breathe, then please know, you are not required to wear a face covering based on CDC recommendations presented in *Considerations for Events & Gatherings*, (Issued June 12, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> “Persons at high-risk for COVID-19 are encouraged to use online or other remote options to attend services, meetings, and other religious gatherings at this time.” See, *Restarting Maine's Economy: COVID-19 Prevention Checklist Phase 1: Religious Gatherings*, (issued 5/22/2020), 4. Encouraged not mandated.

with those outside of your social distancing circle.<sup>6</sup> However, no one will be patrolling your activity nor will you be excommunicated or ridiculed if you hug someone or shake a hand.

We trust you as responsible individuals. If you do hug someone or shake a hand, please keep each individual person in mind, and seek consent before a handshake or hug. An extended hand or open arms are normally viewed as non-verbal consent; but verbal consent is encouraged.

I, as your pastor, will not think more highly/lowly of you, or think you are more/less righteous/unrighteous either way.

You are made right with God by His Grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone; not by whether you adhere or don't adhere to manmade rules.

If you are still struggling with a proper greeting, then consider a bow or a friendly wave with your "hello!"

#### **D. Regarding our Guests and Summer Regulars**

For good reasons, Bar Harbor is a traveling hot spot for tourists, and a summer residence for many.

As a result, First Baptist Church Bar Harbor becomes a destination for many Christian travelers who value gathering with God's People on Sunday, and hearing the truth of God's Word.

In addition, during troubling times, people ask the big questions of life and begin searching. As a result, church attendance often increases.

So, when you arrive, no one will be asking your travel history, or the reason you are in attendance.

Although, if you are visiting, we ask that you would provide your name and a phone number for contact in order to maintain records for contact tracing.

If you are planning a visit from any location outside of the state of Maine, please check the updated guidelines for out of state visitors from the Office of the Governor, in addition to the guidelines from the Town Council of Bar Harbor.

#### **E. Regarding Those Feeling Unwell**

If you are not feeling well, or have any of COVID19 symptoms, please remain at home.

We will not be conducting any medical history exams or temperature checks.

You are not made right with God by attending a religious gathering or doing a religious activity. Rather, you are made right with God by His Grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. That's it.

### **5. Reserve Your Spot:**

We ask that you RSVP for a seat to help us better accommodate our usage of space. We will send out a weekly email with a link. We have limited seating available. So please reserve a spot only if you certainly plan to attend.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 5

### **Concluding Remarks:**

We are uncertain how long this phase of the Re-Gathering process will last.  
There is no ideal or completely safe time to begin meeting again.  
Yet, we Trust God and His Sovereign Plans as we are taking precautions to be responsible.  
We look forward to beginning step one of our Re-Gathering process on June 21, 2020.  
See you real soon!

For His Gospel & Glory,

Justin

### **References**

#### **Conversations & Meetings include:**

Notes and conversations from regular deacon meetings  
Personal conversations and email correspondences

#### **Policies and Procedures consulted from other churches include:**

Southwest Harbor Congregational Church, Southwest Harbor, Maine  
United Baptist Church Ellsworth, Maine  
Second Baptist Church Calais, Maine  
Faith Community Fellowship Ellsworth, Maine  
South Penobscot Baptist Church, South Penobscot, Maine  
Eastbrook Baptist Church, Eastbrook, Maine  
First Baptist Church Alcoa, Tennessee  
First Baptist Church Heavener, Oklahoma  
Liberty Baptist Church, Liberty, Missouri  
Durham Evangelical Church Durham, Hew Hampshire  
Seacoast Community Church Portsmouth, New Hampshire  
Middletown Springs Community Church, Middletown Springs, Vermont  
Pursuit Church Orlando, Florida

#### **Websites:**

Barharbor.gov  
Cdc.gov  
Maine.gov  
Disneyworld.disney.go