

## Opening the Church Building for Private Prayer

Many congregations are considering opening their sacred space for private prayer, especially as the weather grows less conducive of such spiritual practices as hikes, bike riding or walking a labyrinth. Some congregations have already begun to open their buildings for private prayer. Here are suggestions, drawn from their wisdom and various other scientific and spiritual sources.

- Have regular posted times for this, not random dropping in. Church members only.
- No one is admitted without a mask, worn properly over nose and mouth, and consistently throughout.
- Ask people to sign up for a time during the “open period”. This allows you to monitor number limits, which in many jurisdictions is a percentage of capacity. It also allows you information for contact tracing, if that becomes important.
- As much as possible, crack windows or doors to provide some ventilation. Warn people to bring shawls or coats as the building will not likely be warm and toasty. They might well bring cushions or pillows, particularly if your pews are hard bare wood.
- Don’t have books, tracts or papers lying about. Encourage people to bring their own devotional reading, prayer beads, icons or small art work.
- Candles should not be lit during this time, unless one person is absolutely designated the “candle monitor” to keep eyes out for wax dripping, wick smoking or even candle forgetting, a major fire hazard.
- You might consider marking off pews for people to sit in, roping off adjacent pew rows -- or even every third row -- to encourage distancing.
- Establish a practice of silence during these times, not only because talking encourages people to get too close together, but it’s disturbing to people praying.
  - Signs reminding people about silence may be useful.
- If you are making yourself available as clergy, pastoral caregiver or the like, have a special area of the sanctuary where quiet -- but distanced -- talking will be most private and least troublesome to others. We strongly advise against taking someone into your office at this time.
- If you would care to lead a brief office (eg., Noonday Prayer), make sure that folks get the service on their devices, as Prayer Books and Hymnals will have been removed and stored during this entire time. Do not celebrate the Eucharist or a Healing service or conduct some other lengthy service unless your plan for in-person worship has been approved, and the Regathering Covenant has been signed.
  - This time of private prayer is not the same as public worship.
- There is no social time permitted -- so don’t lay out coffee and snacks. People may bring their own bottled water.

- Advise in your publicizing (or sign-up vehicle) that bathrooms are only available in an emergency -- take care of personal needs before coming. In case of emergency, follow signs installed in the bathrooms about spraying and wiping down every surface touched. And leave the bathroom door propped open (rubber wedge) between uses.
- It is fine (maybe wise) to have two locked (labeled) boxes with slits in the top available near the entrance or exit. One to receive offerings. One to receive prayer requests (small slips of paper, “use your own pen” near that box). Or send those prayer requests in through the congregation’s website, and those offerings by the designated online giving methods.
- Do not have water -- blessed or otherwise -- in the font or holy water vessels.
- It is fine for people to bring their own knitting or embroidery or other handwork, as many people use that for meditation. Likewise their own audio devices and earphones for favorite devotional music.
- If you have a musician who practices at the church, one thought is to open for private prayer at the time she or he is practicing. That may be a blessing for those privately praying. Of course, we are under a no singing/no choir season at the moment.
- If it conforms to your congregation’s piety, it is OK to take the Reserved Sacrament out of the tabernacle or aumbry and lay it on the altar (in its reservation vessels) on a corporal, near the front edge of the altar, so it is visible. Make sure someone puts it all back into the tabernacle or aumbry at the end of the time.
- In the interest of hospitality, have a couple of people from the congregation present for opening up/locking up, making sure people observe silence, stay distanced and wear masks.
- We suggest you consider a sign at the exit about maintaining silence as you leave and refrain from engaging each other in the parking lot.
- Another sign we have heard of reads:
  - “Others are waiting for their chance to enter this sacred space. Stay as long as you wish but only as long as you need.”
- Somewhere you might put a notice: “If you’d like to share with us about your time of private prayer at [\_\_\_\_\_] Church, you can do so by [posting on our Facebook page, sending a message through our web page, etc].

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