

The Obligations of Freedom

By Joseph Britton

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RE: "Churches essential, allow them to serve," January 6, 2021

My thanks to Pastor Steve Smothermon for sharing the experience of Legacy Church during these pandemic times. His comments were helpful in giving us all insight into the thinking of that church's leadership regarding the response they have chosen to make to the restrictions that these days have required. Perhaps, as a contrasting point of view, I might share the experience of my own congregation, St. Michael & All Angels Church, an Episcopal parish in the North Valley.

When it first became clear last spring that the closure of churches to in-person worship would have to extend for some time into the future, we decided to adopt two primary questions to guide our decision making about what to do. First, how could we as a Christian church best ensure the safety and well-being of our own people? And second, how could we as citizens best serve the needs of the wider community?

One course that seemed open was to establish a set of objective public health targets, consonant with the state's own guidelines, to clarify what our options were. In the end, we opted for targets that are based on a 7-day average of new cases, rates of infection, and test positivity. Once we decided on those benchmarks, they helped us to decide during the summer—when all the targets were being met—that we could safely hold outdoor, in-person services. More recently however, when the numbers clearly indicated that it was no longer safe to do so, we once again backed off.

Instead, we have lately tried to focus on making available multiple alternative points of contact, whether online worship and programs, curbside communion, phone calls to those shut in at home, or socially distanced pastoral visits. Our goal is to reach out personally to as many of our members as possible, to support them, and to keep them in touch with the church and with one another. The result has been an

outpouring of creative connection and spiritual practice throughout the congregation.

As for the wider community, it seemed to us that we could choose to regard supporting the governor's efforts to control the pandemic as both a privilege and a civic duty, rather than an infringement on our rights. We have not fretted about what other types of businesses or organizations may or may not be able to do—we have only tried to take responsibility for our own actions by not contributing to the virus' spread through unsafe social gatherings. Moreover, where our church provides essential social services such as childcare and a food pantry, we found ways to keep those ministries operating, working in close collaboration with public officials. Their support and advice has been invaluable.

Our commitment to contributing as positively as we can to a prudent response to these difficult days has been more than challenging, but doing the right thing usually is. The *Book of Common Prayer* leads us to pray that we may learn to accept our responsibilities to our fellow citizens, which often means a willingness to sacrifice oneself on behalf of the common good. For true freedom, as we understand Jesus to have taught, carries with it the obligation to care more for the welfare of the other person, than for the autonomy of our own willful individualism. These trying times have been an enormous opportunity to put that core conviction into practice.