

Further thoughts based on the journey of one parish

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Queen of Apostles Parish

Like every other parish, Queen of Apostles struggled at the beginning of the pandemic. The staff and leadership quickly had to learn new skills and adapt old ones simply to keep moving forward. Until August of this year, we operated under a series of temporary administrators until our pastor returned, so much of developing a parish response to the challenges of the pandemic fell to the staff and pastoral team. The following observations and suggestion grew out of that collective experience. Every parish is different, with different needs and resources, so I share our experience in the hope that it might spark an idea that would serve the needs of your own parish.

Communication

One of the first things we learned is that direct, up front communication with the parishioners can go a long way towards alleviating their stress, and consequently the stress of the parish staff and administrators. An information vacuum can feed individual fear and encourage some to fill the void with misinformation. We found that direct communication (and time to assimilate the information) helped our people more readily accept and adapt to necessary changes.

Group Investment and Involvement

We soon learned we had a large population of untapped volunteers just waiting to be put to work in service of our church. Utilizing them took planning and effort, but it helped build parish unity. These are just a few of the things we did with the willing assistance of our volunteers:

- **A phone bank to make calls weekly to our parishioner**
Sometimes a simple check in to see how a parishioner is doing or give them a friendly ear to talk to can have profound effects especially for the more senior of our congregation or those with compromised health. Does your parish have an outreach group that could lead this kind of ministry?
- **Zoom groups**
Zoom fatigue is a real issue for many, especially those in ministerial roles who have been zooming since March. For others however, it can be a lifeline. The platform is easy to use and multiple administrators can share the organizational duties. You may only get a handful of participants but those who take part will be grateful for the outreach. Our volunteers started a Zoom Rosary Group and our Bible Study group went virtual as well. The choir established a weekly "Zoom Nite" just to stay connected and we soon learned to celebrate birthdays and other member events by

signing up for e cards. Other groups of parishioners are also utilizing Zoom for chat rooms.

- **Expanding Information Channels**

We keep our parishioners informed of new parish protocols through the parish web page and Facebook page, and through e-mail blasts and pulpit announcements--making sure to regularly thank them in the process for their help in implementing the protocols. We are also careful to stress that adhering to proper protocols is not only the way our church can remain open but also how we keep all of our parishioners as safe as possible. The more we stress that, the more appreciative the general membership is.

- **An Ombudsman line**

We have heard of other parishes establishing one staffed by volunteers with a ready sheet of answers to common questions relating to parish schedules to help ease the burden on the administrative staff of the parish.

- **Outdoor ideas**

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in New Berlin established an outdoor "Stations of the Nativity for Advent." Here is a link to their website:

mystelizabeth.com. Just click on the "Advent" button and go to "Stations of the Nativity." Or go to <https://youtu.be/7Z6bTgmH9pU>

Parish Safety Issues and Procedural Suggestions

- We created a "Social Distance Stick"-- a 6 ft length of 1 inch pvc pipe that we use to space chairs easily for meetings and gatherings. The cost is nominal. We don't make light of safety but the stick is a useful, yet lighthearted way to quickly arrange seating in our gathering space, Parish Hall, and other rooms for on campus activities as allowed in the Catholic Comeback Matrix. We labeled ours with a personalized message:



- To help keep the church clean and sanitized after each event we expanded our Hospitality Ministry to include Ministers of Safety who don protective gloves and help clean pews, door knobs, handrails and any surfaces touched by parishioners. Many hands make light work and with a crew of 8-10 at each Mass we were able to keep our sanitizing time to less than 20 minutes. As a

thank you to our Safety Ministers (including our Greeters and Ushers) we designed and ordered . . .

- Personalized Masks. We ordered three-layer, custom printed facemasks on line (we included our parish Logo and the phrase “Love one another as I have loved you”) for just over \$2 per mask. It was an opportunity for our Safety Ministers to share their pride in their church as well as their concern for their fellow parishioners. Now that the Safety Ministers are proudly displaying theirs, many parishioners have asked to purchase one and we are considering ordering them for everyone who wants one or two. We ordered ours from <https://www.etsy.com/shop/CanvasWorldGifts>
- When we realized that the cleaning procedures we had been using were damaging the finish on our pews we researched and purchased an electrostatic sprayer. They are available for between \$600 and \$800 (Ace Hardware has them) and are easy to use. Depending on the size of your church spraying time can range from 15 to 20 minutes. Be sure to allow for adequate airing out time afterwards (a minimum of 20 minutes). There are several different sprayers on the market. The sprayer below is by Victory Innovations who also provided the disinfectant spray, which is diluted 1 oz. per gallon of water and has been safely used in hospitals throughout the country. NOTE: Operators should wear goggles, gloves, and an N95 mask while spraying, and a Tyvek jumpsuit (available for \$3 or \$4 from most home improvement stores) is recommended to keep spray from attaching to the sprayer’s clothes.



This is by no means meant to be an exhaustive—just a sharing of our own experience to spark ideas. Anything we can do to encourage ownership in the process by our parishioners and get the message out that we’re in this together will only strengthen each of us.

On Friday we will present a list of mental and spiritual health resources and self-care strategies we can all use to cope with the current stress. This is being prepared for us by Stephanie Delmore, the *Archdiocesan Employee Support Coordinator for Parishes and Schools*. We have asked her to present a webinar in January on mental and spiritual health. Those who register will be asked to do a bit of reflection and homework beforehand.