

Although it will be some time before our Maplewood friends and family meet for worship in person, here are some interesting observations from someone whose church has begun having in-person worship again. And there are some "gems" in here that are good for all of us to remember.

The weird, comforting feeling of going back to church

By Mary Wisniewski, *Chicago Tribune*

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I've been going to church again, and it's weird.

Not bad weird, or good weird. Just surreal weird, like a banana with a mustache. It's like a lot of things during this pandemic not quite good enough, but better than nothing and the best we can do. It's a little bit tiresome, and a little bit funny.

Chicago's houses of worship started opening again in late June, but with lots of rules to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. At first, only 50 people were allowed in our Roman Catholic church at a time, according to Archdiocese of Chicago rules, and everyone had to be masked and keep 6 feet of distance. The crowd limit has since risen to 75, with the same rules in place, but the numbers haven't gone that high yet. People are nervous, or they don't want to sit in a hot building in a face mask for an hour.

The Sanctus, Gloria and other parts of the Mass are being spoken, not sung, by the congregation, to avoid the spread of the virus. Hymns are sung only by a cantor, with a pianist accompanying. People have to register to go to Mass, as if they were reserving a table at a chic restaurant, and get checked off before they go in, so we know who was there and allow for contact tracing in case someone gets sick.

Eager for any kind of change, I signed up at my Northwest Side parish to be one of the social distancing volunteers who make sure everyone's following the rules.

We stand at the back, squirt sanitizer into cupped hands as people enter the building, give masks to the maskless and check off names. Then we go up front during Communion, to direct traffic and spray people's hands again with another, quick-drying sanitizer before they receive the Eucharist. While distributing the host, the pastor wears both a mask and a clear plastic face shield, so he looks like a cross between a cleric and a Blackhawks goalie.

Churches, like grocery stores, are decorated coronavirus-style with duct tape on the floors telling you how far to stand apart, and which direction to go. In our parish, blue duct-tape arrows point you up the center aisle toward the altar and green tape marks 6-foot distances. On the side aisles, arrows made of yellow tape point you the way out. On the pews, blue tape crosses mark which pews can be used and which can't.

After Mass, more masked volunteers show up to clean the pews where people have sat, and the door handles they touched. Everywhere is the smell of disinfectant.

When I'm not on hand-sanitizer duty, I cantor, singing from the ambo. But I miss the choir who knows when we can gather again? It's strange to look out on all those masked faces, as though we were holding service in a typhoid ward, or during the London Blitz. I wonder if people are singing along silently, in their heads.

Sitting in the hot church on a recent Sunday with my mask, fanning myself with the petitions, I remembered a nun I had in grade school, Sister Harriet, a tough old bird with a gift for allegory. She used to compare the Eucharist to a diamond. She told us, "It doesn't matter what you do with a diamond it's still a diamond. You can mount it in a beautiful ring, surrounded with rubies, or you can stick it onto a piece of cardboard with Scotch tape, and it's still a diamond, just presented in a different way. You can have Mass in a cathedral with gold chalices and a big choir and everyone dressed up, or you can have it in a tent in the jungle with everyone in rags the Eucharist is the same. That's what's important."

Mass in masks, or music concerts on Zoom, or birthdays with a car parade, or anything else that's been changed and reduced because of the coronavirus, are like that diamond taped to a piece of cardboard. They're kind of ugly and awkward and not right, not what we're used to, not what seems proper.

But they're also OK. We're still being human together, while being responsible for each other's safety. Because that's what the pandemic rules are about caring for each other beyond our own comfort. The mask-wearing and the social distancing and the tape on the floors are clumsy reminders of the ideal of all religions, to love one another as we love ourselves, to be each other's servants. And we laugh to keep from crying.

Here's hoping it's a lesson we can carry beyond the pandemic, whenever that day comes.

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