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Reopening Brings New Challenges for Altar Guilds

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By Neva Rae Fox

As the COVID-19 crisis shows signs of fading, the world is beginning to reopen. Organizations of all kinds are considering new procedures for security, cleaning, and sanitation. Altar Guilds are also adjusting across the Church, developing new intensive operating procedures to keep people safe and healthy as they return to worshipping together.

The National Altar Guild Association (<http://www.nationalaltarguildassociation.org/>), the Episcopal Church's little-known advisory body for these behind-the-scene servants, hasn't yet issued any formal procedures for cleaning vessels or keeping church spaces clean. The group's website does, though, offer [guidance on mask-making](https://blog.ecclesiasticalsewing.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/CovidDIYFaceMask.pdf%20and) (<https://blog.ecclesiasticalsewing.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/CovidDIYFaceMask.pdf%20and>) and [safely preparing wafers](http://www.nationalaltarguildassociation.org/?p=3969) (<http://www.nationalaltarguildassociation.org/?p=3969>) for the Eucharist. Churches that have begun to regather are consulting guidelines set forth by diocesan bishops and local health authorities.

Preparing pre-intincted wafers, Eucharistic hosts with a single drop of wine added before consecration, has been a new task for the Altar Guild at [Holy Trinity Episcopal Church](http://holytrinitymelbourne.org/) (<http://holytrinitymelbourne.org/>) in Melbourne, Florida said leader Judy Henderson. The wafers are placed in resealable plastic bags for the congregation's drive-thru Eucharist, which also includes only a single chalice, purificator, and lavabo towel

Henderson added, "With less to do, we've been dividing our altar guild into smaller groups of two or three members so some can be working on the pre-intincted wafers and others can be doing altar guild duties in the church, providing plenty of space for working 6 feet apart. All team members wear masks."

The Rt. Rev. Greg Brewer, bishop of Holy Trinity's [Diocese of Central Florida](http://www.cfdiocese.org/) (<http://www.cfdiocese.org/>) issued extensive guidelines, entitled *Forward In Faith And Not Fear, In Caution and Preparedness* (http://www.cfdiocese.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/05-15-2020_Final_FORWARD_IN_FAITH-AND_NOT_IN_FEAR.pdf). The document, which has been widely distributed across the Episcopal Church and posted on the National Altar Guild website. offers a myriad of suggestions for returning to church buildings.

Brewer explained that the document was developed in response to multiple questions diocesan staff members had been fielding. "Our goal was to provide a comprehensive resource which took some of the fear and trepidation out of the process of reopening," he said. "Our aim was also to help boil down the multitude of recommendations from medical and legal experts, as well as from municipal leaders, into a practical, easy-to-understand document."

The rapid spread of worship broadcasting during the pandemic also brings new considerations, Brewer said. "Many churches have introduced live-streaming of worship services as a result of sheltering-at-home during COVID-19 and they plan to continue livestreaming services even as in-person worship resumes. The Altar Guild will now need to consider both the functional and visual aspects of what people will see on livestream."

Brewer offered a few suggestions to help congregations communicate visually about their concern for safety and cleanliness. Among his tips:

- Since altar guild members will likely choose the PPE selections for the clergy, Brewer suggests "clear or flesh toned gloves make a much better impression than 'Smurf' blue gloves," adding, "The Altar Guild will also need to be sensitive to latex allergies."
- Share with the congregation the extra steps that the Altar Guild implements to ensure sanitation during the pandemic.
- "Put the lavabo bowl and crystal cruet away. Bring out a large basin with warm water, antibacterial soap, fluffy

white towels for each person serving on the altar and administering in any way, and scrub hands for at least 20 seconds in plain sight of the congregation during the offertory music.” He recommended repeating the procedure following communion. “Having a bin or basket for towels to be visibly discarded demonstrates that everyone gets a clean hand towel.”

Brewer reflected, “I know the term ‘unprecedented’ has been overused during the COVID-19 pandemic, but I really am not sure how else to describe the past three-plus months. Never in my 45 years of ministry have I had to implement myself, nor have I had to instruct the congregations of my diocese to employ, such stringent measures. The complete cessation of in-person worship was a shock to our collective body in Christ.”

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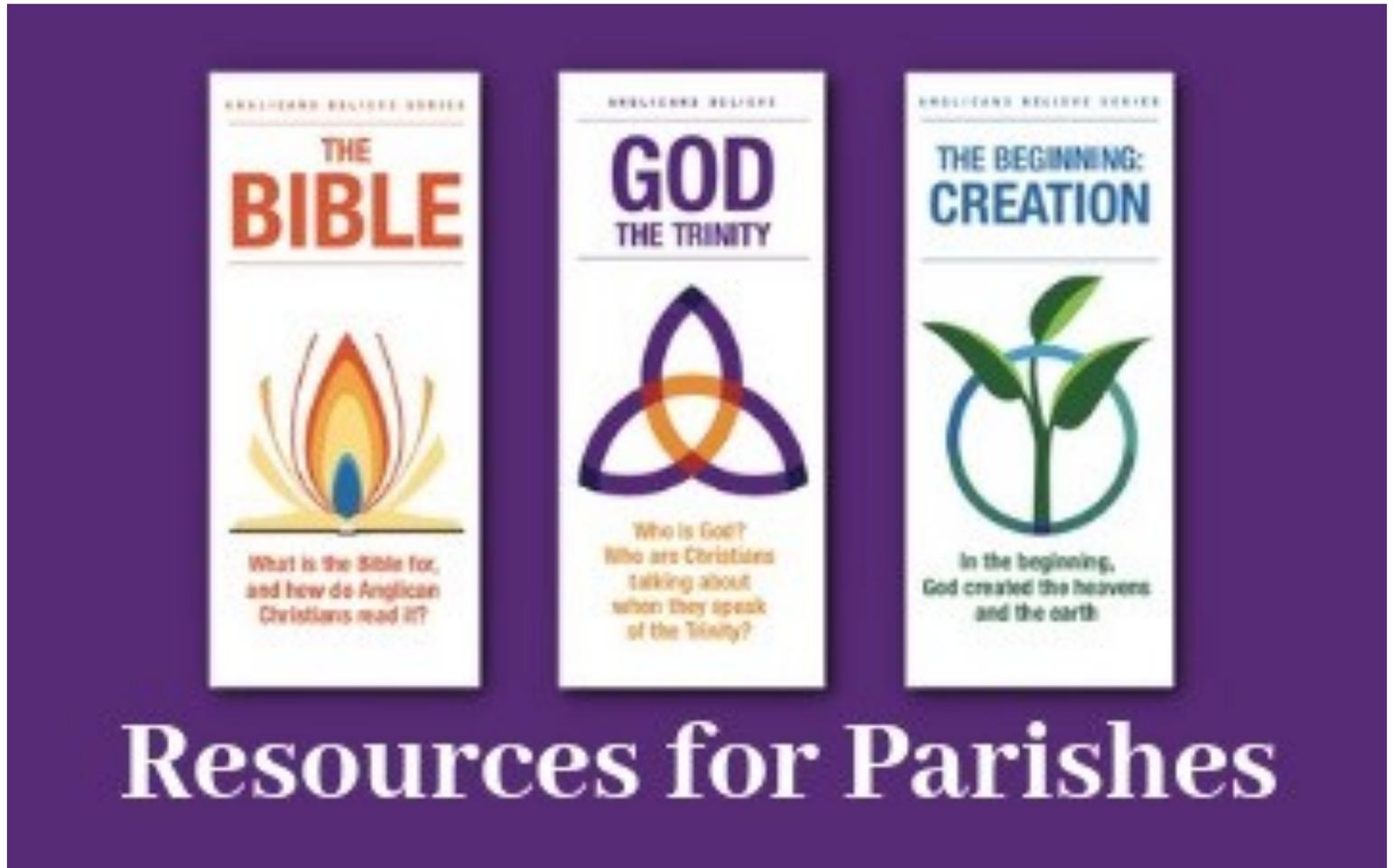
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