

Churches allowed to reopen, but only Methodist Church and St. Mary's have done so

By John Lavenburg

jlavenburg@inkym.com The Methodist Church and St. Mary Our Lady of the Isle Catholic Church were the only island churches to open their doors for worship services last weekend after Gov. Charlie Baker announced churches could reopen May 23.

Although he felt those who came appreciated attending mass in person, St. Mary's pastor Father John Kelleher said the experience wasn't enjoyable.

"To me, there is no way to pray with all of the concerns, worries, guidelines, restrictions, trying to control people's behavior and keep them safe," Kelleher said. "It was probably one of the few weekends of my life I didn't enjoy celebrating masses. Maybe the only weekend."

St. Mary's held six masses between Saturday and Sunday: three in English led by Kelleher, and three in Spanish led by Father Carlos Patino Villa.

There were about 35 people at each mass, well under the state's coronavirus-related occupancy limit for churches.

The guidelines limit each place of worship to 40 percent of its total allowable occupancy. At St. Mary's that means 160 worshippers, as its capacity is 400 people.

Kelleher, however, decided a limit of 50 people made more sense.

"Our pews are so close together we have to have two empty pews between every pew people can sit in. Our guidelines say we only have to do every other but if we do that

prayers to a total time of about 45 minutes. Communion is now done after the final prayer, so once someone receives the Eucharist they walk right out of the church.

Kelleher said if it were his decision, the church would still be holding masses exclusively online. St. Mary's opened because it had to follow directives from the bishop of the Fall River Diocese, Rev. Edgar da Cunha.

"I wouldn't be celebrating public masses right now if it were my decision. I care too much about the people to want to put them at risk for gathering for worship," Kelleher said.

"What I've tried to do is be crystal clear about the risks involved with gathering. That way people know and they can make the decision for themselves."

St. Mary's masses will continue to stream live on the church's website.

At the Methodist Church, Rev. Tom Richard was joined by 14 people Sunday in the main sanctuary for its second service since being allowed to reopen.

The small size of the Methodist congregation made him comfortable opening back up last Sunday.

"We opened and we did it very carefully. One thing that allows us to open is that our congregation is very small," he said.

Similar to St. Mary's, the Methodist Church at 2 Centre Street followed the state guidelines of 40 percent occupancy, masks and social distancing.

have the one person who sets it up wear a mask and gloves," he said.

"We're going to prepare to have it in such a way that we're not passing it out. The people will individually go up to the front and get their own."

Richard said the worship experience over the past two weeks has been different, but it's been nice to see people in person again.

"It's definitely different. We can't greet people on the way in or out. Obviously, no handshakes and hugging," he said. "But I should say there is an intimacy in being present and I think we appreciated that on Sunday."

The Methodist Church will continue streaming its 10 a.m. Sunday services for those who don't feel comfortable attending in person.

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Rev. Dr. Tom Richard, new pastor of the Nantucket United Methodist Church, began holding services inside the church the last Sunday in May, as soon as Gov. Charlie Baker

people won't be six feet apart," he said.

To ensure the guidelines were followed, the pews that couldn't be used were taped off. Arrows directed foot traffic one way in and one way out, and everyone had to wear a mask.

The masses were shortened by eliminating music and all non-essential

The church's capacity under the new guidelines is 80, so it had only a fraction of the people allowed.

Richard roped off certain pews to make sure people were properly distanced, masks were worn at all times and gloves and hand sanitizer were available when people arrived.

There was no communion either week. The first since the reopening will be this Sunday. In the Methodist tradition, communion is the first Sunday of every month.

"There will be separate metal cups that have the (host) in the top. We'll

lifted statewide restrictions. The Appleton organ, behind Richard, is one of five still functioning in the United States. The church is currently looking for an organist for the summer.

Photo by Marianne Stanton

Church: Most services available

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Other churches on the island are content keeping everything virtual, saying it's safer and they've reached more people than ever before. St. Paul's Episcopal Church Father Max Wolf said that's been a silver lining.

"For me, as horrifying as this is, it's the creativity that's come out of this and how we gather," Wolf said. "Our goal is to reach people with the knowledge of God's love and that's happening more than ever in the history of our church."

The success of its virtual gatherings led the church to buy video cameras so it can continue to show the service on Facebook Live, Zoom and YouTube even after the building reopens.

Wolf hosts nightly "Prayers from the Attic" at 8:30 p.m. with his wife, where they read different passages from the "Book of Common Prayer." It can be

on when it can gather in person from Bishop Alan Gates of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. Wolf said Gates indicated July 1 as the earliest possibility.

The First Congregational Church doesn't have a timeline for a reopening.

"We don't have a timeline that we have sat down and agreed upon," Rev. Gary Klingsporn said. "We want to take it one step at a time and see how things are going."

A factor in the decision is the space they use this time of year. Until the warmer summer months they worship in a smaller sanctuary in the back of the church that's heated. Klingsporn said, however, it doesn't have enough space for adequate social distancing and there aren't any windows for air circulation.

The church's main sanctuary, used in the summer, is much larger, with plenty of windows and space.

newsletter through its website, www.nantucketfcc.org.

Congregation Shirat Ha Yam, the only Jewish congregation on the island, will not meet in person until at least July. Congregation president Darren Sukonick said there is no official timetable beyond that date.

"The board of directors is meeting on a periodic basis as we usually do and we'll decide what's in the best interest of the congregation," Sukonick said.

In the meantime, the congregation will continue to hold its services online via Zoom, and will continue to do so even after physical services resume. A schedule of the weekly services can be found on the congregation's website, www.shirathayamnantucket.org.

"I don't think we can step back from providing that service and ensuring members feel there's no hierarchy or group that's allowed to do one thing. We want everybody to

accessed through the church's Facebook page.

There's also Sunday worship at 9:30 a.m. broadcast from the church every week with Wolf, a soloist, an organist and a church official.

It can be accessed through Facebook as well. Or, there's a Zoom link on the church's website, stpaulsnantucket.org.

St. Paul's will get directives

"If we don't have an increase of cases, or concerns about healthcare facilities, that will be a factor as well as how things are going with people coming from off-island and the state," Klingsporn said.

Until they decide it's safe to reopen, the First Congregational Church will offer Sunday worship through Zoom. To get the link you have to sign up for the church's

feel included in our congregation," he said.

The Unitarian Meeting House on Orange Street will not meet in person until at least Sept. 1, given the large size of its congregation, Rev. Linda Simmons said. It will continue to hold a virtual service at 10:45 a.m. every Sunday through its website.