

## General Communications Guidelines

- **Communication is vital now more than ever** - In a world of uncertainty, people long to “know” what is going on, to have a sense of certainty about things that are important and familiar to them. Hearing from their parish or diocese on an ongoing and frequent basis is more important now than ever.
- **Err on the side of overcommunication** - In our current climate, it’s impossible to over communicate; less frequent communication risks losing the vital connection between the parish or diocese and the laity.
- **Stay relevant and know your competition** – There is no lack of news and information in our culture. People are bombarded daily with information from social media, television, newspapers, emails, etc. If the laity are not hearing from their parish or diocese, they are only hearing from other sources. In a sense, you are competing with a media saturated climate which continually diminishes the importance of religion and parish life. High frequency communication ensures that you stay relevant to your people that the Church stay relevant to them.
- **Now is the time to build relationships with laity**
  - If your parish or diocese has strong relationships with the laity, now is the time to reinforce and grow those relationships through regular communication.
  - If your parish or diocese does not have a strong ongoing relationship of communication with the laity, now is the ideal time to establish and grow this relationship.
  - Establishing and reinforcing strong lines of communication is foundational for future efforts to connect, evangelize, and build stewardship once normal parish life resumes.
  - Laity are much less likely to give financially if they do not feel “in touch” with the parish and “in the know” about what’s happening. The more they know, the more comfortable they will feel returning to parish life and supporting the parish financially.
- **Communicate at least once a week pastorally.** These communications should:
  - Reflect a pastoral tone of care, reassurance, prayer, and hope. Ideally, these communications should come directly from the pastor or bishop as a personal address to his people.
  - Be devotional in nature and offer a reflection or message of hope, guidance during this time of stress, hope in Christ as an Easter people.
  - Be personal and friendly offering kinds words of hope, sharing a positive story, updating people on activities at the parish or chancery.
- **Communicate at least one a week logistically.** These communications should focus on practical matters such as:
  - Addressing guidelines from state or local governments and their implications for the parish and sacramental events.
  - Sharing updates on plans for re-opening (even if there is no pending re-opening date, people want to know plans are in place for when that does occur).
  - Giving instructions and guidelines for returning to the parish (for prayer, sacramental events, or public mass).
  - Sharing information about logistical updates at the parish such as cleaning and sanitation efforts, re-working parish space to prepare for re-opening, updates on existing capital improvements, etc.
  - Showing momentum at the parish...“while you have been gone, we have been hard at work...”. This not only demonstrates the work happening at the parish, but also offers a sense of normalcy that the parish is operating and preparing to welcome people back. This will go a long way in promoting financial support.

## Communications Platforms and Methods

- **Social Media**

### Platforms

Social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram are the most commonly used by parishioners ages 70 and younger. Younger parishioners (under 35) primarily use Instagram while older parishioners (35-70) use Facebook. Both audiences are familiar with Facebook Live which allows for live videos to be watched in real time. Parishioners over 70 are not likely users of social media.

### Management

Due to the high frequency use and popularity of these platforms, parishes should be posting on both at least once a day. If your parish does not have a dedicated person to manage your social media, now would be the time to find someone. If a parish has a staff person in charge of communications, this would naturally fall under this person. However, many parishes and organizations rely on volunteers to manage their social media accounts and many younger parishioners in their 20s and 30s are happy to help in this area.

- **Facebook** – This platform is best used to deliver news and information in both written posts and articles and photos.
  - Written posts can give information about the parish, daily scripture reflections and other spiritual resources, links to diocesan, national, or international Catholic news, messages from the priest or deacon, and other such parish or Church-related news.
  - Posting photos is an excellent way to connect with parishioners. Seeing parish photos that remind parishioners of people, events and places that are familiar to them can be a great consolation during a time of difficulty and isolation. These could include photos of the inside of the church and altar (highlighting the Tabernacle or monstrance), of the staff hard at work to reopen the parish, or a picture of a past parish event that would remind parishioners of happy events or experiences for which they can look forward to returning.
  - Parishes should post on Facebook daily and should use a mix of written posts and photos to capture the attention of parishioners.
  - If your parish does not have an active Facebook account, begin encouraging parishioners to “like” the parish on Facebook and begin to follow the parish’s Facebook page. You can do this via text messages or emails to parishioners and encourage this on the parish website homepage.
- **Instagram** – This platform is driven primarily by posting photos with short, simple captions. Instagram users post less frequently than Facebook users and view the platform as a way to get quick, visual updates, but not as a means for news and information. Parishes should post to Instagram a few times a week and can “repost” the same photos posted in Facebook.

### Strategy & Messaging

Every parish should have a social media strategy that is created with the pastor and his staff so that messaging and information sent out by the parish is consistent across all platforms. Messaging should be positive and hopeful and offer a means of helpful information. During times of crisis, the more personal the messaging the better. Parishioners want to **hear and see their pastor**, so the more personal the social media post, the better.

Always keep in mind the tone of language in a post. Social media users usually glance at a post less than second before deciding to read more or scroll on, so you have only a moment to capture their attention. Keeping this in mind, below are some recommendations:

- Avoid using words that are too liturgical or catechetical that some younger parishioners may not be familiar with and that evoke a sense of “institutional church.”
- Lead with warm and welcoming language that draws in readers and connects them to the life of the parish. Though it might be necessary to post new procedures and guidelines for returning to Mass or entering the church for prayer, do so in an inviting and hospitable tone that resonates welcome and warmth.
- Keep posts short – two to three lines at most – and invite users to click through to your parish website for more detailed information.
- Try to use an image or photo in each post. This will increase noticeability and draw in users through imagery that is familiar and comforting.
- The more personal the post (from Father or other familiar faces) the better. Remember, you are not only re-opening your parish, but re-welcoming people back to their church home.

- **Video Messages**

**Advantages**

Video messages are becoming an increasing positive and uplifting way to communicate with parishioners.

Video messages have many advantages:

- Ability to communicate in a personal way by addressing parishioners using voice and tone, body language, eye contact, and other person-to-person features that may be scarce in the current social distancing climate.
- Recording videos in settings that are familiar to parishioners and create a sense of personal connection to the parish such as inside the church near the altar, outside the church in front of statues, steps, and steeples that place viewers in settings that are meaningful to them.
- Ability to customize messages that pertain to the re-opening of the parish. These video messages could give comprehensive tours of the parish grounds with instructions on how to enter the church, how to be seated, what can be expect during the distribution of communion, and how the flow of people will be safely managed. A visual message with instructions may increase parishioners’ level of comfort in returning to the parish for public mass and devotions.
- Ease of producing these simple “homemade” videos often recorded with a smart phone make video messages a low-cost, minimal time commitment mechanism for connecting with parishioners in a personal, heart-felt, informative way.
- Ability to share video messages across multiple media platforms – social media, e-blasts, and websites – offers continuity of messaging regardless of age and medium.

- **Emails/E-blasts**

**Familiarity**

Emails and E-blasts are routine and familiar ways to communicate with parishioners, if you have access to email addresses. Most parishioners are used to receiving email communication from their parish and the open-rate for routine parish emails is fairly high and consistent. If this is the case at your parish, make the most of this established relationship during this time of isolation from parish life. As with all other mediums, be consistent in sending valuable emails on a regular basis. If your parish has an ongoing and established email relationship with your parishioners, they will know to look for these messages and depend on these emails for news and updates.

**Limitations**

There are limitations to relying too heavily on email communications. Often, emails are too long with organizations trying to share too much at one time. Once a reader begins to scroll, the likelihood of them reading all the way through the email begins to lessen. In addition, emails lack the personal touch and connection that video or Facebook Live platforms provide. Only communicating by email limits parish’s availability to connect with parishioners beyond just words on page.

### Suggestions for Effective Emails

- **Keep emails short and to-the-point.** The longer a reader has to scroll to find the information, the less motivated they become to read further. The best approach to emails is to list headlines with a few accompanying sentences, then “click to read more” to get the full article. This re-routes readers to your parish website where they can read the full article. This allows the reader to only click-through to the topics or information that interest them and allows the parish to provide comprehensive information that is not limited to the email format.
- **Include photos and other graphics** to break up the email layout making it easier to read. This also helps keep the emails from being too cold, too wordy, and overall less aesthetically appealing.
- **Email with a purpose.** When parishioners received too many emails about smaller matters, they may begin to ignore the emails and the open rate will drop. Be purposeful about when you email and why you email. Make the email worth their time and attention.

### • Personal Phone Calls

As parishioners are increasingly disconnected from parish life, there is a risk of the parish becoming less essential overtime. Remaining relevant and personal to parishioners is vital during this challenging time of isolation and uncertainty. Personal phone calls have proven to be a highly effective tool for re-engaging with parishioners, showing personal concern, building stronger bonds with the parish, and meeting the various needs parishioners are facing during this pandemic.

Some parishes are allocating staff time by asking each staff member to call a list of parishioners to check-in with them, listen to their concerns, update them on the status of re-opening and other related events, and to make a stronger personal connect between the parish and its parish family. Each phone calls just needs to take few minutes. Below are recommendations for personal phone calls:

- **Prepare a call outline** so those making phone calls have a concrete agenda for the call and are equipped with consistent messaging and warm, welcoming language. The pastor and his team of calls should determine in advance the main outcome of the phone calls. These could be things such as establishing a deeper personal connection, gauging parishioner needs, or sharing important news and updates in a more personal way.
- **Keep calls brief** – five minutes or less. This ensures that phone callers are able to complete their list of calls in a timely manner and reach as many as possible.
- **Keep notes of each call, even if just a few sentences.** This will enable the parish to track parishioners who express various needs such as physical, pastoral, or financial hardships that require follow up. A few lines of notes will also help gauge the overall climate among parishioners which may aid the priest understanding areas or topics that could be universally addressed through parish-wide communications.

### Additional Communications and Outreach Strategies

Every parish has a uniquely different make up of demographics, economic conditions, advantages, and limitations. The more creative a parish can be with communications they can tailor to their specific circumstance, the better. Below are examples of creative outreach and engagement strategies to consider and might spur other ideas from your parish team.

- **Personal visits by your priest, deacon, staff member, or volunteer.** Even if visitors cannot enter homes, they can drop off a special gift (spiritual book or pamphlet), leave behind a prayer card reminding people that all parishioners are prayed for during daily mass offered by the priest, a postcard for parishioners to fill out with specific prayer intentions that could be mailed back to the parish, or another type of meaningful leave-behind. Someone from the parish stopping by to “just say hello and check on you” even from a distance would go a long way helping people feel cared for and connect to the parish.

- **Asking parish school children to make homemade cards** to send to older parishioners to let them know they are being thought of and prayed for in a daily basis.
- **Text messages reminding parishioners they are being prayed** for that includes a link to the parish website where prayer intentions can be listed and prayed for during the priest's daily mass.
- **Handwritten notes to families and individual parishioners** letting them know that their priest is thinking about them and praying for them daily. Divided among the staff, simple cards or letters could be generated within a short period of time.

### Conclusion

Now is the time to communicate most effectively with your parishioners. If you do not have a strong relationship with your parish family, now is the time to begin establishing one. If you do have strong lines of communication, take full advantage of this opportunity to strengthen parish bonds. Be sure to communicate regularly and on a routine basis. The more a parish can establish a communication pattern, the more familiar parish communications will become to parishioners. Don't fear overcommunicating. People are hungry for personal connection so don't be shy. Reach out, engage, re-invite, and re-welcome.

### Messaging

Goal	Tone	Content	Audience
Re-Open	Reassuring, safe, welcoming, pastoral	Logistical, factual, clear, concise, informative	Current, active parishioners
Re-Invite	Friendly, safe, welcoming, inviting	Informative, warm and welcoming, reassuring	Registered parishioners who do not attend on a regular basis, if at all
Re-Welcome	Exciting, hopeful, loving, community-oriented	Warm, re-establishing important social, emotional, and sacramental connections; establishing a foundation for evangelization	Both active and non-active parishioners, new faces coming back to the parish
Inform and Update	Clear, concise, factual, yet warm and pastoral	Updated and relevant information of interest to parishioners and that will instill confidence that parish life will resume at some point	Both active and non-active parishioners
Spiritual	Inviting, familiar, religious	Devotional and meditative, offering hope and perpetuating joy	Both active and non-active parishioners
Connection	Familiar, consoling, loving	Reminder of connection to parish, how important each person is to parish life, instill confidence in pastor and parish staff during time of instability	Both active and non-active parishioners, new faces coming back to the parish
Outreach	Helpful, inquiring, service-oriented	Seek to find out people's needs and ways the parish can help meet those	Both active and non-active parishioners, new faces coming back to the parish