Episcopal Diocese of Georgia

Resource on Workplace Flexibility during COVID-19

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**Workplace Flexibility in the Diocese of Georgia**

In these unprecedented times the Church is asking how we can “be church” when we aren’t in-person with each other. The gospel teaches us that we are all called to be disciples of God’s love and grace. I would argue that every Sunday we’ve spent in the pews, we have been equipping ourselves for a moment such as this. We are still in community even though we are not sitting beside each other as we respond to our litany of prayers, saying, “Lord, hear our prayer.”

It is critical that we find ways to follow the guidelines of the CDC, while also meeting the needs of our most vulnerable neighbors, coworkers, friends, and family. We as clergy and lay leaders in the church must set the example to ensure we protect the vulnerable and continue to show Christ’s mercy through our actions. This is challenging for church employees who demonstrate God’s grace by showing up day after day to do the hard work of the church. The Washington Post noted, “What happens next in this pandemic depends largely on our government, health institutions and 328 million inhabitants — all making tiny decisions on a daily basis with outsize consequences for our collective future.” The Episcopal Church and The Diocese of Georgia understand the importance of those small daily decisions, including the need to practice workplace flexibility.

For many, this is the first time in their careers they’ve worked from home or practiced flexible work to follow social distancing guidelines. I write this in full awareness that some jobs do not have the luxury of being able to distance from their work. Essential emergency workers are on the front lines. We can clearly see that through the service of our nurses, doctors, first responders, grocery store employees, and delivery workers. However, as someone who is trained in and has designed telework policies, I’m here to say that we can still meet the immense needs of the church while working from our home offices and practicing social distancing in our churches and church offices. This document provided key essentials for a successful workplace flexibility plan.
Teleworking? Here’s how to cope….

**Gather the Right Tools** – ensure you have the right technology and equipment to meet the needs of your day-to-day tasks. This looks differently for individuals depending on the scope of their responsibilities. However, some of the most common technology requirements include:

- **Strong internet connection** – If you have a basic internet connection, consider upgrading to a faster speed. Many remote connections and video sharing programs require a faster internet speed to work efficiently.
- **Cloud-based file sharing for key documents** – Place important files on a cloud-based and secure website to gain access to files that might be housed directly on a church computer or in paper files. Google Drive and Microsoft OneDrive are good free applications to leverage if your church doesn’t have a cloud-based server.
- **Video and audio teleconferencing** – In-person meetings need to shift to electronic ones. I will be the first to admit the importance of face to face interaction; however, it is critical that we shift to engagement through phone calls, video conferencing, and audio teleconferencing. Many services like Zoom and WebEx can be used on a month to month subscription basis. Google Hangouts is a good free option for those churches on tight budgets.
- **Remote email access** – In order to maintain a balance between work and non-work times, we suggest that you refrain from forwarding your work email to your personal email. Instead, ask your employer if they have a way to access your email remotely on your computer. Most have the ability to access email through a web-based application. Microsoft Outlook can be accessed on the web, for example.
- **Strong security protections** – Cyber security threats increase when individuals work at home. Make sure to have good virus protection and access sensitive files on your work email and not your personal email. Many organizations provide stronger security measures on their email servers.

**Project Plan** – The daily landscape is shifting. Project planning techniques can be valuable to track, maintain and adjust priorities as needed. The following are high-level techniques:
Leadership engagement – Leadership sets the tone for an organization. Clergy should note their top five goals during the comings weeks to help shape messaging and communication with the church and employees.

Create a list of the immediate needs – While day-to-day operations need to be maintained, what are the other emerging needs of the church or office? Make a list of the new tasks, for example, daily sanitation of public spaces, phone-tree outreach, or creating online resources.

30-60-90 day planning – Craft a quick (doesn’t have to be very detailed) thirty day plan of activities and owners, then do the same activity for sixty and ninety days. This document can evolve as needs shift.

Track updates – Find a way to report, track, and communicate amongst team members tasks as they are completed.

Identify Ways to Stay Connected – During times of crisis, many people are being inundated with communications, all of them expressing that they are important and time sensitive. To cut through the noise, make a plan to stay connected with your team members. Some examples include:

- Scheduled check-ins – Establish a quick weekly or daily electronic method to check-in with team members. Find what works well for the culture of your folks. Test out different methods (i.e. phone conference, video conference, or email chain). Open the meeting with a short agenda based on top priorities and then open the floor for general questions and concerns from the team.
- Email – In an office setting a lot of brainstorming, questions, and requests happen verbally. It can be an adjustment to find ways to adapt to electronic communication. Follow best practices for email and send requests, work products, and basic questions via email regularly throughout the week. If you need to brainstorm or ask questions about a complex topic, schedule a phone or video conference and follow-up with an email to summarize the outcome, identified tasks, and owners of tasks.
- Chat features – If you have access to Google chat, or other chat features, it can be a helpful way to stay connected to teammates for quick conversations, questions, and to boost team morale.

Adjust Communication Style and Tone – Close office teams and cultures often find challenges when switching to a 100% electronic method of communication. It can be challenging to read tone through chat and email. Be patient during transitions and review written communications for
tone and context – miscommunication often occurs during stressful transitions. The following are considerations for both internal and external communications:

- **Review, review, review** – Make sure to review all methods of written communication, as this is good practice for both internal and external communications. If in doubt, have a team member review the communication for tone. Ask yourself, what is the desired effect of the communication?

- **Innovate channels of communication** – Are you using Facebook Livestream? Videos on your website? Think outside the box and test different way to engage your audience. Many churches are switching to livestream; however, consider also pre-recorded messages, simple one-pagers, FAQs, and pictures to keep people engaged.

- **Make it personal** – There is power in a personal story. Every clergy person knows this when they write a sermon. Consider stories you can share during this time, whether your own individual stories, or across the congregation. This can be an effective way to maintain community in the midst of turmoil.

- **Make templates** – Draft templates that can be used when quick communications need to go out. It is helpful to have these both during emergencies and when establishing a brand for your church. Examples include templates for press releases, newsletters, letterhead, Facebook posts, etc.

**Create a Good Workplace Environment** – Science shows that people are productive in different environments. If you are most productive at a desk, establish a desk set-up at home. Otherwise, find a spot in the house you can designate for work. This will cue your brain to focus on tasks at hand, when otherwise you might find yourself distracted by homelife. Is your entire family at home? CNBC provides some good advice in an article, highlights include:

- **Be upfront about expectations** – Communicate to your employer that you have children at home and that this requires you to be flexible. Also communicate to children that when you are working at home that you are working and that this requires some adjustments on the family’s part.

- **Make a schedule** – Many schools are providing guidance on how to maintain a schedule for children and teens out of school. Make a schedule that allows you to prioritize your work needs around times your children are also engaged. Is your child or teen conducting school online? Or are they asked to stay on
“vacation?” Georgia Family Connection is providing resources and updates for impacted families, including several free digital learning resources.

- **Establish a separate workstation** – Identify a workplace where you have a door that can provide a signal that you are working and need distance.

**Establish Balance and Boundaries** – Employees of the church have a challenge of establishing work-life balance and boundaries for wellness. Once you get in the groove of flexible work, you might find it hard to pull yourself away from work to focus on other needs. Consider the following habits if working from home:

- **Take a break** – Make sure to get up from your desk regularly throughout the day. Set alarms to gently remind yourself if you find this challenging.
- **Identify a “quitting time”** – It is hard sometimes to maintain normal business hours when working from home. People tend to work more hours when at home. Therefore, if you don’t have a critical deadline, try to maintain normal business hours to establish good boundaries.
- **Reap the benefits** – When you are taking a break, find ways to enjoy the benefit of a home office. Make yourself a nice lunch, take the dog for a walk, take one of your conference calls on the porch, or light a nice candle. While these may seem like simple actions, you can still be productive and professional while enjoying the environment of your home.

This document isn’t a comprehensive “tool-kit” for workplace flexibility. There are many resources, including online tools and templates on the web. I hope these recommendations highlight some of the best practices from individuals and corporations who have been operating in flexible work environments for decades. In the coming weeks, I plan to tweak and add to the resources available through the Diocesan office. In the meantime I am available as a resource to you all. Please feel free to reach me at keasterlin@gaepiscopal.org or contact my phone at 912-441-1220.