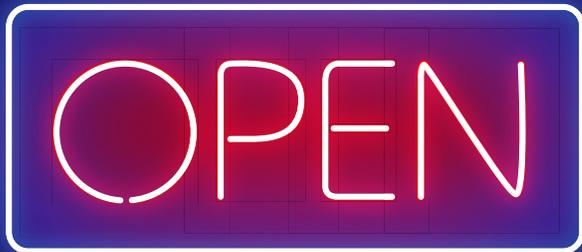




FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

Opening Up by Benjamin J. Dueholm



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Many parts of the country have lifted or are considering lifting restrictions connected to COVID-19.

What are some of the difficult questions we must answer as we consider lifting these restrictions?

How do we make responsible choices in this uncertain situation?
How does our faith guide us as we discern our path forward?

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Open for Business

As of early May, several states have begun to relax emergency restrictions on “nonessential” businesses that were put in place to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus. By fits and starts, these months-long restrictions seem destined to end in the near future.

In some states these moves to “open up” have raced ahead of the public health guidance from federal and state officials, leaving mayors, county executives, and health experts to plead with citizens to exercise a restraint no longer required of them by state order. In other states—like Texas, where I live—reopening orders have preempted local measures, including ordinances requiring masks in public. All of this comes amid a confusing mix of protests, lobbying efforts, and public uncertainty.

All of this confusion leaves us to answer a vital question. How should businesses and community organizations go about deciding to “open up,” especially as they navigate conflicting guidance and, in many cases, their own dire financial needs?

In April, the White House and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued guidelines for reopening the country that focused on “gating” criteria for three “phases” of returning to normal. Nevertheless, many areas—including Dallas, where the church I serve is located—are allowing businesses to resume without meeting the first phrase criteria. As per the CDC guidelines, older people or those with another risk factor are “strongly encouraged” to stay home, but no provision has

been made for at-risk workers to receive paid leave if their employer reopens before they can return to work. Considering how many infections and deaths have been concentrated among “essential” workers, it is easy to see how many people would be concerned about risking exposure as businesses open again.

This forces us to ask how we can navigate these competing demands and what precautions should be taken—especially with vulnerable workers and church congregants—as reopening progresses.

REFLECT:

- What is the state of the coronavirus outbreak in your state or region?
- What’s the nature of business restrictions in your area? Do you feel confident in resuming normal activities if you’re allowed to do so?

Competing Goods?

Since the beginning of the outbreak, the public debate over restrictions has assumed a trade-off between the seemingly disparate of goals of saving lives and saving livelihoods. Dan Patrick, the lieutenant governor of Texas, gained notoriety by saying explicitly, “There are more important things than living.” While the thought may seem callous to many, Patrick’s was not an opinion held by one man alone. Many politicians and commentators agreed, especially with the implicit idea that our only available choices are an uncontrolled illness or widespread economic ruin.

It’s not hard to understand why people worry about this. If a business operating on small margins and lacking access to a great deal of credit isn’t allowed to make sales, it isn’t going to be able to make payroll or cover rent. As of this writing, an unprecedented wave of job losses has led to over 33 million people filing for unemployment benefits, and even this staggering number is likely an undercount of real job losses. With the loss of a job often comes a loss of health insurance, housing instability, and an acute risk of falling below the poverty line. When circumstances appear to force people to make a choice between a height-

ened risk to their health on one hand and the threat of financial ruin on the other, you can’t blame them for preferring to risk the former.

On the other hand, it’s not at all obvious that opening up will assure economic well-being. Restaurant reservations plunged before any state took action to close them down. Air travel and car sales, which were not restricted, plummeted in April because people did not want to travel or take on large, debt-funded purchases. Simply allowing customers to return doesn’t guarantee that they will, even if those customers have not themselves lost their income.

All the same, reopening will surely bring back some revenue and help some businesses stay afloat. The question for many individual businesses will be how much cost and inconvenience they can bear in order to reduce risk. The bigger question we will have to answer together is whether “the economy” and human lives are really two goods that have to compete with each other. Is “the economy” really reducible to outputs, GDP figures, or—worse yet—stock market fluctuations? Can a “livelihood” or health insurance coverage only be distributed through a job?

For our society, things that appear like hard and fast rules of life may just be choices in disguise. There are certainly measures that can support households and businesses without forcing them to accept a high risk of infection. Some were implemented in emergency legislation in March and April, but more could be done if we so choose. The risk to “essential” workers is not fixed and inevitable but may be changed by precautions and resources like paid sick leave, safer working conditions, and adequate protective equipment. How we open up, and what happens when we do, depends on the choices we make together.

REFLECT:

- What is an example of a “trade-off” that our society takes for granted?
- What concerns do you prioritize when you have to make decisions during this pandemic?

What Can Be Opened

Our response to a pandemic is, inevitably, about much more than epidemiology or economics. It's about morality. If we're honest, we're being asked to open up more than our businesses and workplaces. We will also have to open up conversations about our ideas and about whose lives matter and about what costs we will bear together to ensure they matter.

As we've already seen, this intellectual opening up can go in different ways. A time traveler from February might well be shocked at how we've managed to accept such an ever-growing death toll, and how quickly the public conversation moved from direct aid to households, businesses, and states, to the riskier proposition of pushing those still employed back into their workplaces.

At the same time, we have seen swift and generous mobilization around ordinary tasks like distributing lunches to school children, filling local food banks, rent abatement, and eviction forbearance.

Unemployment benefits were extended (albeit temporarily) to part-time, freelance, and gig-economy workers. People cooperated to distribute masks to health workers and others at risk and willingly changed their lives in drastic ways to protect vulnerable neighbors and hospital workers.

While we figure out what to open, when, and how, we should take this opportunity to address this moral challenge directly. We may become more callous and dismissive of human suffering, or we may become energized by the thought that we truly are in this together. We have the chance to emotionally distance ourselves from victims who may differ from us—they may be older than us, do different sorts of jobs than we do—but we also have the chance to discover a new capacity for empathy in our interdependence and our universal need for protection.

REFLECT:

- What are your church's plans for reopening, if any?
- What values do/should those plans reflect?

Core Bible Passages

In Galatians 6:2, Paul tells his readers, "Carry each other's burdens and so you will fulfill the law of Christ." In this letter, he's asking the community to bear each other's sins and failures, which is a particularly poignant expression of Christian charity. The application is also more general as we are to bear one another's misfortunes too. In the same way that the congregation stays in solidarity with the wayward member, it must stay in solidarity with those who have lost income or live with extra health risks.

In Acts 2:44-45, Luke records that the early church in Jerusalem was united and shared everything, saying, "They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them." This took place long before there was a system of wage labor for workers, but it suggests provision within the community on the basis of need rather than any narrow sense of earning.

The Torah includes strict rules on collecting debts, which are to be cancelled on a regular schedule (Deuteronomy 15:1). Necessary items are not to be taken as pledges for debt, particularly if they are needed for working or warmth (Deuteronomy 24:6, 17). This teaching reflects the truth that God is the only owner of the world and the only creditor; the people are to steward the land for the benefit of all. The economy was made for humankind, not humankind for the economy, to borrow Jesus' formula.

REFLECT:

- How do the economic ethics of the Old Testament inform the way we help each other today?
- How can we carry each other's spiritual and financial burdens today?

Hard to Understand

Sifting through news reports, social media feeds, and government documents, we may feel that we are obligated to become amateur epidemiologists, economists, and statisticians in order to understand our current situation. Take the example of face masks. Do they work to prevent the spread of the virus? Well, that may depend on what we mean by “work.” They seem to make transmission less likely, but the homemade nonsurgical masks many of us are using right now are most useful if we happen to be carrying the virus. In other words, they may end up protecting other people, but they won’t protect us. Then again, if we all wear them, we’ll all be protected. There’s a question of fact here, but it turns out to be impossible to separate from an ethical challenge: will we, together, take on a practice that benefits us in general even if it has limited value to each one of us individually?

As a general rule, humans are not great at grasping probabilities and percentages. When we eyeball it, the death rates from influenza (about 0.1%) and COVID-19 (estimated between 0.5 and 1% so far) both look quite low. But if half of America eventually gets infected (a plausible scenario), that’s the difference between 300,000 deaths and nearly three million. It’s hard for nonspecialists to deal with statistics on a scale that large.

Decision makers have to work hard to watch out for information that seems to confirm their biases, and to check for different perspectives before assuming that a course of action is helpful, useful, or excessively risky.

REFLECT:

- What are some questions you’ve found difficult to answer during this pandemic? Why?
- How are you getting information during this crisis? Is it helping or hurting?

United Methodist Perspective

As the pastor of a Lutheran church in Dallas, I’ve been in touch with colleagues from various local churches, including those in the North Texas district of the UMC, about our plans for reopening in the future.

One major consideration for our congregation is our preschool. We have been watching the local data in line with the CDC guidelines to give parents some indication of when children will be able to return. Along with this comes other considerations: How will we clean rooms and surfaces? How will we assure daily temperature checks at drop-off? How will we protect staff at elevated risk? Can you really keep three-year-olds in masks?

At the same time, we’re trying to answer similar questions about our wider congregation. We have a lot of older worshipers who will be “strongly encouraged” to stay home for some time to come. With that in mind, should a church actually prohibit people from coming if they are over 65? Is there any way to keep a music director safe as a choir sings, sending tiny droplets toward him even if he stands more than six feet away? There is some indication that outdoor air is safer than extended contact indoors —should we start meeting outside with masks?

Corporate worship is central to Christian life, but even the obligation to worship is subject to the requirements of charity for the vulnerable and justice for those who work, volunteer, and clean up. These are just a few of the complicating factors churches must consider as they reopen.

REFLECT:

- What steps is your church taking towards reopening?
- How are they working to answer some of the questions mentioned above?

Helpful Links

- In “Why the Coronavirus Is So Confusing,” Ed Yong covers the challenges the outbreak poses at the level of the virus itself, the disease, expertise, and public information. <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/04/pandemic-confusing-uncertainty/610819/>
- The United Methodist Church has produced a wide-ranging collection of coronavirus-related resources for personal and congregational use. <https://www.umc.org/en/how-we-serve/promoting-health-and-wholeness/coronavirus-information-resources>
- The COVID Tracking Project assembles daily updates on tests, results, and reported deaths for every state. <https://covidtracking.com/>

About the Writer

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Next Week in **FaithLink**
Connecting Faith and Life

Homelessness

by Kira Austin-Young

On any given night, approximately 500,000 people in the United States are experiencing homelessness. What are the causes of homelessness? What are some common misconceptions that surround this issue? As people of faith, how can we care for those who are unhoused while also addressing the systemic issues that lead to homelessness?



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Opening Prayer

Lord God, we know that you are always walking beside us, even during the most trying and most uncertain circumstances. Help us to be bold and confident in our faith, and help us to apply our faith to these difficult and complex questions so that we may put into practice your will. Help us to keep an eye on compassion and justice as we struggle with questions that may have few good answers. Amen.

Leader Helps

- Have several Bibles on hand and a markerboard and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.
- Open the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.
- Before you begin with the main essay, discuss what kinds of conversations group members have seen or heard either on the news or on social media about reopening. What are some of their questions? What are their anxieties? What are their concerns?
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
- Read or review highlights of each section of this issue. Use the *REFLECT* questions in order to stimulate discussion.
- Close the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.

Teaching Alternatives

If possible, invite a local doctor or nurse to talk to your group about their experience with COVID-19 and their thoughts about what it might look like to open up public spaces.

If you are meeting remotely, go around the room and share what questions and concerns each group member is having during this crisis. How can the rest of your group work together to carry these burdens and help to alleviate some of the stresses caused by this pandemic?

Closing Prayer

God, we thank you for your guidance and for the community that you have surrounded us with. We are grateful for all of the members of your community and we thank you for the image of God that we see in all of humanity. Help us to see your image in everyone, even when we are frustrated with them or when we disagree with them. Continue to work in us and through us. Amen.