



A Pastoral Letter from the Bishop

Friday, April 24, 2020

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

First and most importantly, please know that each of you and those you love are in my prayers daily. My appreciation and admiration for all you are doing to remain connected pastorally and spiritually with one another, and with the communities you continue to serve so faithfully, is without end. The lay and clergy leadership exhibited during this challenging time is encouraging and inspiring, and every day there are reports of the difference you are making within and beyond your congregations. How you are living through this pandemic and its consequences witnesses powerfully to the resurrection of Jesus.

With Governor DeWine's announcement of a three-phased "reopening" plan scheduled to begin on May 1, we are all imagining how it might inform our own decisions about our common life, work, and worship as the body of Christ. As the descriptions and directives of Phase 1 continue to emerge, it is clear that what we are currently doing is in accordance with both the federal and state guidelines. While religious institutions have been excluded from the ban on gatherings of a certain size in Ohio, our Christian responsibility to the safety and security of others mandates that we err on the side of caution and adhere to what medical and scientific professionals define as best practices.

Those of us who have family members who have contracted COVID-19, and that includes me, are painfully aware of how vulnerable all of us are to this virus, and that, moving forward, our vigilance must not be compromised, especially for the sake of those who are most susceptible. Thirty-five percent of communicants in The Episcopal Church are 65 years old or older. Two thirds are 50 or older. It would reasonably follow, therefore, that half of our communicants should continue to shelter in place at least through Phase 2. As well, schools and organized youth activities are directed to remain closed through Phase 1. With this guidance, and a clear understanding of our moral and gospel responsibility to act first for the benefit of others, **all congregations of the Diocese of Ohio will continue the suspension of public worship until further notice.**

Most of us had imagined, for some time at least, that on a particular date and time, perhaps of our own choosing, we would be able to gather as we have in the past and celebrate in a grateful and triumphant way our victory over, or at least survival of, the novel coronavirus. We

are seeing now that our emergence, if not out of this, at least in to what lies ahead, will be less precise and more humble. As a society used to a high expectation of certainty, we are being challenged and called to live into greater ambiguity and at a yet undetermined cost.

I know how hard this is, particularly for those who yearn for the pastoral services of our faith and tradition. My father-in-law died on Good Friday, and not only were we unable to travel to be with him in his final days, we are unable to gather as family and friends and do those familiar things we have long relied upon to process our grief and affection. Likewise, I am in a number of conversations with couples planning to marry who are coming to terms with the fact that their celebration of matrimony will differ substantially from what they had for some time imagined. And we have candidates for Holy Orders whose ordinations will be unlike any they or we have experienced previously.

If we are to be realistic, these examples represent the tip of the iceberg. We will learn new ways to be the church and to carry out the practice of our faith, but whatever our reopening, it will not open up onto the landscape where we were before. To that end, we are continuing conversations with clergy and lay leaders about how we will move forward into this new reality, taking into account the complex pastoral, spiritual, liturgical, and financial implications with which it presents us. The power of evil would have us be anxious and disheartened, for that will leave us vulnerable to contention and division. But, we are Easter people, and this is a time to be energized by the prospect of new life. This is a moment in which we may well come to understand the promise of resurrection more as the first followers of Jesus did and replicate in our own lives the courageous faith of our spiritual forbearers.

As we move ahead, questions of when and how will continue to be explored in detail. Members of the Bishop's Staff have been working tirelessly to collect, interpret, and provide resources pertinent to all aspects of parochial life, relying on the contributions of clergy and lay leaders from across the Diocese. The collaborative spirit of so many is a testament to the collegiality and strong fabric of the church. As we imagine gathering for worship, formation, and service in the months ahead, we will need to ask searching questions about whether we do so for those who can take the risks or wait until it is safe for all. Might small congregations begin sooner than large ones? Young ones sooner than older ones? In gathering for worship, how do we handle the Eucharistic elements, if at all? Can some partake and others not? Do we act as one body, or meet individual needs and desires? How do these values inform the parochial context? How do they play out in the diocesan context? How do our practices for gathering for worship, virtually and in person, inform our gathering for youth programming and summer camp, and vice versa? How do we explore the implications of potential changes in financial resources? What will it cost us in our giving and spending practices – as individuals, congregations, diocese, and wider church? How do we imagine the practice of ecclesial governance in each context?

Each of these questions, as do countless others, reflects the extraordinary opportunity given us in this time to reflect, redirect, and recommit ourselves to the life of corporate faith, being the body of Christ in the world. The Standing Committee, Diocesan Council, Mission Area Deans, Trustees, and other groups have been engaging these discussions, and more such conversations

are being planned. Most of these questions do not have simple, clear answers, and will take the combined wisdom and sacrifice of many to discern what is the next right thing. I have every confidence in God that we will find a variety of roads forward. There is rarely only one approach; God is not that stingy. The challenge is our willingness to walk together.

As we continue to explore the next steps, there are a number of things that warrant mention now.

Weddings

If it is necessary to celebrate Holy Matrimony at this time, **please limit participants to the priest, the intendeds, and the two required witnesses.** A subsequent celebration of the marriage may be held at a future date, if and when circumstances for such public worship allow, in the spirit of the celebration of a civil marriage. Please contact me with any questions.

Funerals

Please continue to abide by the direction that, if interment is necessary, only a **minimal number of immediate family (ten or fewer, including the priest) may be present for a graveside service outside, observing current norms of distancing.** A memorial celebration of life may be held at a future date, if and when circumstances for such public worship allow. Again, contact me with any questions.

Clergy Conference

For the annual Clergy Conference scheduled for May 12-14 at Geneva State Park, we will not gather in person. I ask all required participants (actively serving parochial clergy) please to hold that time open. We will not use all of it, but we are as yet uncertain how much time and when will be needed for virtual gathering. Additional information will be forthcoming. As we have found with other such meetings, more extra-parochial and retired clergy may be able to participate in a shorter, virtual format.

Ordinations

Candidates for Holy Orders who have completed their pre-ordination formation and been approved by the requisite ecclesial bodies will be ordained in the presence of the canonically required participants. We will do all we can to provide access for others to participate online, which may well make it possible for many to be a part of these important services who might previously not have been able.

Summer Camp

As with schools and organized youth activities that are currently closed, camp is not permitted in Phase 1. Whether the restrictions and procedures in Phase 2 will allow us to provide summer

camp at Bellwether Farm this year is still unknown, but the summer camp and Bellwether staffs are preparing for all possibilities. As soon as details become more clear, registered campers, their families, and the wider public will be notified.

Bellwether Farm

Farm life continues unabated in terms of birthing lambs and kids, fattening pigs, collecting eggs, seeding and planting vegetables, and installing four new colonies of bees. Seventeen gallons of maple syrup have been processed and bottled for Chef Lonny's culinary creations. The dining hall remains shut down, as do all restaurants, but plans continue for when the facility will again be available for public use. It is possible to visit the farm for a hike in the woods and fields, respecting physical distancing and using masks, homemade or otherwise. Please call or email the Bellwether office in advance to let the staff know of your desire to visit. As soon as reopening is possible, and there is clarity under what conditions, all will be notified.

Trinity Commons

Trinity Commons and the Cathedral itself remain closed to the public. All diocesan staff are working from home with effective procedures for receipt of mail and email, and access to voicemail and necessary databases. Each office has established its own schedule for being in the building for limited and essential tasks, in collaboration with appropriate Cathedral and Commons staff.

Diocesan Convention

At this time, it is not imaginable that we will be able to gather as four hundred lay and clergy delegates and staff in one place (save perhaps First Energy Stadium or Progressive Field) in November. We are currently reviewing the canonical and secular requirements that pertain to Diocesan Convention and the governance of corporate entities in Ohio to explore how to accomplish our work virtually. The dates will remain Friday and Saturday, November 13 and 14. At this time, it is uncertain how much of which day will be needed.

We are not alone in facing the future of a church that is yet to be revealed. It has ever been thus; only now is it for us more starkly evident. Across The Episcopal Church, all of these challenges are being experienced and the corresponding opportunities being explored. In weekly Zoom conversations with the bishops of the fourteen dioceses of the Province of the Midwest (Province V), as a member of the Presiding Bishop's Council of Advice, on wider church task forces and committees, and in the countless conversations with lay and clergy leaders that I and our staff colleagues engage in every week, we are finding generous companionship in sharing insights, resources, and encouragement. Throughout all of God's creation, from the sub-atomic to the intergalactic, loss always leads to newness. We can have confidence that this is a time when our vocation to be Christian comes alive in ways many of us have neither

experienced nor ever expected. That indeed is the stuff of new life, what the resurrection of Jesus promises us, and that for which each of us is created in God's imagining.

I was reminded recently of Winston Churchill's Mansion House speech in November of 1942, after British forces had defeated Rommel, driving the German troops out of Egypt. In our battle against the coronavirus and its consequences, his words seem apt:

Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.

Let us hope that this end of the beginning will lead us, in patience, humility, and courage, to the newness God dreams for us and God's church.

It is a singular privilege to be in this together with you.

With gratitude and affection,

The Rt. Rev. Mark Hollingsworth, Jr.
Bishop of Ohio