



The
Episcopal Diocese
of New York

August 30, 2020

My Brothers and Sisters,

It is the end of August, and the fall is upon us. It is my hope for all of you that you have had some opportunity, even as we continue to live mostly in isolation from one another, to find rest and recuperation. Margaret and I spent most of August at our rustic cottage in the Catskills, where the highlights were: a brief visit from our granddaughters (they and we quarantined for weeks to make that possible); fireflies; the daily appearance of bright, red, beautiful Mars in the inky darkness of the night sky; and lunch one day with Bishop Mark and Karen Sisk. That was the first time we had eaten in public since March 9, and it was wonderful to see Mark and Karen again and to find them so well. Someone might say these were small things, but they were something, and they were reminders that a world which seems to have come undone still has things in it that I love and which move me so deeply and which make me a better person. We have a lot of work ahead of us - much to do - and I hope that you also have had some respite, and a reminder of those things which move you and enlarge you too.

Next week is Labor Day weekend, and the traditional time of fall start-up for our parishes. And that represents a new chapter of our life with COVID-19. Through the spring and into the summer, you received a series of emails from me regarding the pandemic and the choices and decisions which every church was invited to make about the movement back into some form of in-person worship. As well, on the last day of May, in the week following the killing of George Floyd, you also received [my letter](#), in which I was joined by Bishops Allen and Mary, called “White Supremacy Meets the Beloved Community,” with a reflection on the imperatives for all people and for the church in the escalating crisis around social justice and our continuing urgent claim that Black Lives Matter, and in the new civil rights movement which was exploding across America. I want to say a little about both of these subjects, and where we are at the end of a long, hot summer. And what it means for us in overlapping crises to still be the Church.

Worship in a Continuing Pandemic

Since the beginning of July, a number of our churches have begun holding some form of in-person worship. This has usually been with a smaller-than-usual congregation, and scrupulous adherence to rules regarding masks, disinfectant, and rigorous social distancing. The good news is that these first steps back toward in-person worship have mostly succeeded. However, at least an equally large number of our churches chose not to come back together during the summer, but to wait until after Labor Day, or even until after the turn of the year. This is the “new chapter” of COVID which I referenced. Over these next weeks and months I expect to see the move toward in-person worship expand, with all of our churches coming back together in some form, however limited or modest, by the end of 2020 or soon after. I also assume that our churches will continue the remote and remarkable live-streaming or zoom practices of worship, fellowship and study which have sustained us as a diocese all along the way so far.

It would be very helpful if every church could let me know if you have begun in-person worship and when you did, or if you have not yet, your expectations and plans for coming back together in person. And especially, if there is anything you need, or questions you need answered, please call on me or any member of my staff. COVID infection rates have continued (surprisingly, I think) at a low level in New York throughout the summer. This bodes well for our careful return



to something like normal life in our congregations. But if we should see a surge in infections in the fall or winter, we may have some setbacks and a return to remote worship.

All of that is to say that earlier in the year we thought that by the fall we might be largely past all this, but we are not. We are clearly in a time of transition, with an active pandemic virus still among us, and that continues to carry risks. For that reason my colleague bishops and I have decided not to resume the cycle of Sunday parish visitations until after the turn of the year, on the Feast of the Epiphany. Some parishes feel ready for visitations and have told us so, or have asked about holding confirmation services with few, if any, members of the congregation present. But some parish priests, significantly, have said that they would like us to wait, until Advent or Epiphany. They are just not ready. Their churches are not ready, to say nothing of the congregations which are not even meeting in person yet. We have found these voices, and these concerns, compelling.

So we will not be making Sunday visitations to our churches just yet. Please do not ask us to. Let us work on our stability in public worship a little longer. However, all three of us are ready at any time to record videos of sermons or homilies, Bible studies or teachings, or zoom conversations with young people, vestries, and parish groups. We are also preparing for some in-person parish happenings, including small-size institutions of new rectors, and funerals of those who have died during the pandemic months. We also expect to be working this fall on offering some small kind of in-person modest regional services of confirmation around the diocese.

In the scheduling of visitations for 2021, our first priority will be covering those very many 2020 visitations which had to be cancelled. We bishops will also be re-convening the regional zoom conversations with clergy across our diocese, and in some form the Wednesday video meditations as well.

I said back at the beginning that my decisions would be at every turn careful and cautious. That may have been frustrating for some of you. But I ask you also to go slowly, be careful, take small steps first. I think this is how we live with COVID. I think it is how we beat it.

Black Lives Matter

There is a litany of names, victims of institutional violence against Black people in America, that we carry with us all the time. Certain names, of those who have in some way so fully captured the hearts and imaginations and grief of people that their memories have been lifted above the unending background of racist killing and lives lost to become for us icons of violated innocence, powerful reminders across time of the high cost of American racism. In his day, Emmett Till was one of those names, whose lynching lit the spark that ignited the Civil Rights movement. The martyrs of Alabama and Mississippi and all who fell in the struggle for equal rights. Martin Luther King of course. Our own days have provided more names than we can bear, to shine among them in that constellation: Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin, Deborah Danner. And more.

And over the last six months, the Martyrs of 2020. The front page of today's New York Times features a lengthy and rewarding portrait of Breonna Taylor, shot in her bed in Kentucky back in March. Her killing and that of Ahmaud Arbery while jogging through a white neighborhood three weeks earlier, and most especially the murder of George Floyd under the knee of a brutal police officer, became the catalyst for what have been continuing nightly protests across America which have signaled for three months that we have reached and passed a tipping point, beyond which there is no going back. These people have been taken, but their names now occupy a hallowed place in the minds and hearts of America.



On the last day of May, in the week following the death of George Floyd, Bishops Allen and Mary joined me in a letter to the diocese entitled “White Supremacy Meets the Beloved Community.” We joined our voices to the outrage felt by all of you in our churches and communities. And that outrage, and the protests, have continued to characterize the three months which have followed. During that time America lost in a single day the gentle, powerful, prophetic Civil Rights leaders Congressman John Lewis and the Reverend C.T. Vivian. When John Lewis died, it felt that our country, and maybe the world, paused, stopped, took a breath, and marked together the passing of one of the greatest among us. We may perhaps not see a saint of his grace and stature among us again in our lives. As a bold public witness, the words “Black Lives Matter” are painted now in giant yellow letters on some of the most significant streets of American cities. And the insistence over these months, never stilled, that Black Lives Matter, and the strident backlash against that claim have given us a season in which to reflect more deeply what those words mean, and what they mean in an America far from fully redeemed.

As a white American, the Black Lives Matter movement, now six years old, has been for me an opportunity, and invitation, to listen, to learn, and to go more deeply into an understanding of what it has meant and still means to be a black person in America. It has been an opportunity to grow in understanding of the ways in which we all participate in the systemic racism that characterizes our culture, our institutions, our public life, and even the church. I have been profoundly grateful for the witness and teaching and stories of black people in this movement. And I have been moved and shamed to discover how much I have taken for granted, and how much my black friends never told me - things which were perhaps too personal, too vulnerable to say - and the possibilities which were now being laid before us by a new era of honest declaration and the opening of eyes. I have been moved to receive the unfolding of human hearts which have carried so much pain. And I have been shown the poignancy of simply “mattering,” and what that modest claim says about the value and worth of African Americans in America. I believed that these learnings and discoveries were widely received, and that we were in an historic moment of transformation in America. I imagined that we were entering a new chapter in our hope to become a better people.

But one week ago today Jacob Blake was shot seven times in the back in Kenosha, Wisconsin. We see again how readily the death penalty is imposed against black people for any offense or often enough no offense. But what was astonishing was to see this shooting happen at a time when the whole world was watching. To happen so shamelessly. To happen without apology. And this week nothing could be clearer than that for far too many people in this country black lives do not matter. That the human lives of black people do not matter, and that they may be taken away with impunity.

In a time of such crisis, of divisions drawn so boldly, of the fundamental truths of human life and human dignity and of the holiness of lives lived in God becoming lines of battle, it falls to people of faith to recommit to our most deeply held convictions, and to remember who we are and the demands that are placed on us by God. John Lewis, who offered himself for the costs and sacrifices of this movement, and carried the scars of it for the rest of his life, said that “You never become bitter. You never become hostile. You never try to demean your opponents.” These are the words of a Christian man who has taken the Gospel fully into himself. But in these days, nothing could be more counter-cultural.

This diocese, through our Reparations Committee and Anti-Racism Committee, are offering opportunities for people in our churches and communities to rediscover and recommit to our Christian faith, and to become witnesses to the deeper and truer life which we believe is our call. The Apology Retreat this summer was wildly over-subscribed, as people flocked to engage together the learnings and listenings of this movement. And this fall we are about to embark on



a diocesan-wide book study of Ibram Kendi's "How to be an Antiracist." It is a tremendous book, and everyone who reads it will see their country, and more importantly themselves, with new eyes. If your church has not yet planned to participate in the book study, please make those preparations now. These are the things we can do right now, all together, to transform and strengthen our own church, community and witness. That we may be part of the change, and citizens of that Beloved Community which, despite all, I still believe is being born. With every good wish, I remain

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a small cross followed by the name "Andrew" in a cursive script.

The Right Reverend Andrew ML Dietsche
Bishop of New York