



The Episcopal Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast

March 12, 2020

Dear beloved children of God,

"WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER" With those words, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry opened this week's Spring gathering [by video conferencing] of the House of Bishops on Tuesday. They were a part of his reflection on the current coronavirus crisis. He went on to say: *"We are in this life together. We are a part of each other, for good or for ill. We are a human family. We were made that way. We were made for God, we were made for each other."*

Bishop Curry is right, and with this belief comes a sacred concern and obligation for each other. On Saturday morning, I enjoyed the privilege of worshipping with some 50 members of various chapters of the Daughters of the King. I was struck by the wide gamut of perceptions and positions on the current crisis implied in the way folks greeted each other. Some wanted to hug; some offered a hand or elbow; some did not want to touch at all. Some seemed confident and unafraid; some seemed unsure; some seemed worried; a few seemed fragile and afraid.

"WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER" And being together is fundamental to our life as the people of God, but how do we value and respect those who might arrive to worship worried and afraid? How do we navigate the myriad and differing positions and perceptions of what to do? These questions swirled around in my head on Saturday as we began our worship, and I had something of a revelation.

Jesus speaks of practicing one's faith with humility and empathy. He warns us to not let our faith be a stumbling block to "little ones" among us. In his letters, Paul echoes this theme. "But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. *I Corinthians 8:9* "Do not make another stumble. Let us therefore no longer pass judgement on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another." *Romans 14:13*

It dawned on me on Saturday that my faith compels me to make decisions about our communal habits and practices in order to tend to those who are fragile, frail, and frightened. My faith in Christ Jesus means that no matter my position on the current crisis, I am called to take careful and intentional steps to allay fear, and tend to the most vulnerable, worried, and fragile in our midst. In other words, this is not just a matter of mitigating the spread of infection; it is a matter of pastoral care and concern for the "little ones" in our midst.

Out of pastoral necessity and due to governmental declarations, other Bishops have issued strict directives to their dioceses, and in a few diocese, even closed churches. Thus far our diocesan area has not experienced the same level of infection as other regions. So for now, I am only issuing suggestions. Clergy and vestries need to make decisions together, and you should do so with the

upmost consideration of your congregation's context, and earnest pastoral concern for those who are afraid.

HOLY EUCHARIST My interpretation of the canons and constitution of our church forbid withholding the cup from the laity during a public service of the Holy Eucharist. However, that it is offered does not mean it should be received. When one receives Communion in one kind (either bread or wine) one has fully participated in the sacrament. This is practiced by many in recovery. When serving as a parish priest, I recall occasions when those in the last days of their life were unable to consume a wafer, so a single drop of wine sufficed.

With that in mind, communion should always be offered to everyone, clergy and laity, in both kind. Those who wish to drink from the cup may do so. For those concerned about infection, simply cross one's arms as the chalice is presented. Eucharistic Ministers should still present the chalice with the appropriate words. Given all that I have read and heard, I strongly discourage the use of intinction. Individual serving cups is a practice that is antithetical to our denomination's sacramental theology.

For those who choose to receive the wine from the cup, do not wrap one's hands around the cup, rather guide the chalice to your lips by a slight grasp at the base.

All Eucharistic Ministers, lay and clergy, should remember the importance of the use of a purificator and wiping the chalice after each communicant. Also, hand sanitizer should be used by all Eucharistic ministers immediately before the administration of communion.

THE EXCHANGE OF THE PEACE I have heard many opinions and psychological theories about the use of fist pumps, elbow touches and foot taps. Some prefer to simply bow, nod, or smile. I want to suggest to you another way to exchange the peace. That is to use this as an opportunity to borrow the ritual used by our brothers and sisters at St. Marks for the Deaf in Mobile, Alabama, and teach each other to exchange the peace by using American Sign Language. If you want to give it a try, we have made a brief video that shows how to do so. That video can be found on our diocesan website or by clicking here: <https://youtu.be/WDWzS7t7YI>.

BE CREATIVE I have heard from one clergy who has decided to use Morning Prayer during the remainder of Lent. In addition to avoiding all the issues involved with Holy Eucharist, this idea can heighten the Easter celebration while also exposing your congregation to a beautiful form of worship.

THE BAPTISMAL FONT If you have not done so during the season of Lent, I strongly encourage congregations to empty your baptismal fonts of water until Easter.

FELLOWSHIP & MINISTRIES Remind coffee hour and feeding program volunteers to wash their hands and handle food with plastic gloves or utensils. Also be mindful of the way food is served. It might be prudent to have servers rather than self-serving lines. Then again, a few weeks without food may be the most judicious decision.

APPOINTMENTS Offering plates may be more carefully passed if the usher alone is able to hold onto the plate as they are circulated, or put the plates in a location accessible to folks when they come forward for communion.

FURNITURE Ensure that altar rails, pews, and other often-touched pieces of furniture are cleaned/sanitized after every public gathering.

HOW LONG? I would also suggest that whatever habits and practice you adopt, that you remind people that these practices are temporary. You might want to suggest a date, say for example Easter Sunday, when they will be reassessed and/or discontinued.

PRAY Finally, while the preceding points are meant as permission to make changes to your habits and practices, the following is an Episcopal directive. **Copies of this letter are to be shared in every congregation on March 15 via Sunday handouts OR via an email to all members, with a public announcement to the congregation on Sunday regarding the email. I also direct every congregation to include petitions in your prayers of the people for those who are sick across our world, and those who care for them. Here are a couple of suggestions:**

O God of heavenly powers, by the might of your command you drive away from our bodies all sickness and all infirmity: Be present in your goodness with your servants that their weakness may be banished and their strength restored; and that, their health being renewed, they may bless your holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. *The Book of Common Prayer*, pg. 458

Sanctify, O Lord, those whom you have called to the study and practice of the arts of healing, and to the prevention of disease and pain. Strengthen them by your life-giving Spirit, that by their ministries the health of the community may be promoted and your creation glorified; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. *The Book of Common Prayer*, pg. 460

As I stated last week, if the situation worsens in our area, I will offer additional guidelines to our common practices. For now, be mindful, be careful, and be prayerful, and remember that such precautions are not just for medical reasons, they are a matter of our life together as the people of God. We are all in this together.

+Russell