



April 30, 2020

A pastoral letter to The Episcopal Diocese of Spokane:
From “Stay home” to “together in person” worship and ministry

Dear Friends in Christ,

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. Isaiah 43:19

As I write this, we are in the third week of Easter. We know that Easter is not simply a day, it is a season. Perhaps even more importantly, it is a way of life. We often say that we are Easter People. This is true even when the world around us seems to be in chaos and fear. We are called to hold fast to God, even as God holds fast to us. With Christ, and in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, we are united, and therefore can transcend this time which is marked by fear, division, and uncertainty. During this time, when the world is in fear, the Church has a critical role to play. We are called to follow Jesus with confidence and faith, and do so in a creative and compelling way.

As I wrote last Friday, I have been asked many times “when can we return to church?” Let me say as clearly as possible, *we are the church!* We are currently away from our buildings and physically distant from one another, but we are being church in remarkable ways. Our clergy and lay leadership have responded magnificently in this chaotic and uncertain time. There is, perhaps, more church going on now than there was two months ago. It is not happening at our buildings with public attendance for worship, or for meetings or studies. Rather it has come to your living rooms, kitchens, bedrooms, patios and anywhere you are via streaming and recorded services and home worship materials. The prayers, readings, sermons, and teachings have reached far beyond those who would normally attend at our congregations. I see this as one of the most profound manifestations of incarnational ministry. Jesus came to us and met us where we are. God did not say you must come here or there to meet me. Jesus came to us. Our clergy and lay leadership, by providing the services, reflections, story times, bible studies, and more through the internet have literally come to you with the good news wherever and whenever you are. *God is indeed doing a new thing in the Episcopal Diocese of Spokane!*

As marvelous as this is, it does not fulfill our desire and need to be physically together. I had hoped that by May we would be able to be fully back and together in our buildings. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Nor can we be certain that we can avoid another spike in cases by relaxing our restrictions. **Therefore, the suspension of in person worship, and the continuing of providing worship with online and home worship materials shall continue at least until the end of May.**

It has become clear that it is impossible to forecast a date to safely resume full in-person worship. The virus does not answer to us. We respond to the realities of this virus as we follow

the command of Jesus to love our neighbor. How quickly or slowly the virus will recede largely depends on how we behave. Reopening while the virus is still spreading only gives it the opportunity to continue its upward trajectory. The Diocese of Spokane will contribute to mitigating the virus, not spreading it.

As your bishop, I believe that it is important we have a clear road map for the way forward, even without being able to predict a definite date to safely resume in-person worship and outreach. This pastoral letter is that road map. One of things we have learned is that each state is different in regard to the spread of the virus. Further, within our diocese, there are differences from one locale to another. We also have two different state governments making different decisions about the dates by when different businesses and activities may open. What this indicates is that the best course for us to follow is to have a process that takes into consideration these differences. That means that one part of our diocese might be able transition to in-person gatherings sooner than another part.

If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete, be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility, regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Ephesians 2:1-4

The seasons of our transition are as follows:

- **Season One: Our current reality**
- **Season Two: Continues mitigation and slow lifting of restrictions**
- **Season Three: Lifting of physical distancing with protection**
- **Season Four: Application of learnings and future preparations**

Throughout all these seasons we are called into discernment, what is God calling us to be and do here and now? We are being asked to learn the lessons of this time, to ask the right questions in order to seek God's call to us as we move forward. This work will be essential for our long-term mission and ministry as a diocese.

Note that this is stated in terms of “seasons” and not “stages” to emphasize that they do not correspond directly to any government reopening stage.

We are a church for a world in crisis

Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do so with gentleness and reverence. 1 Peter 3:15

- Let us with boldness proclaim the Good News of God in Jesus Christ.
- May all our actions be those of faith, hope, and love.

We are a church for a world that is in financial uncertainty

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. 1 Peter 4:10

- Stewardship of our resources is not optional.
- We will need to be thinking about mission and ministry in new ways.

We are a church for an impatient world

Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day. 2 Peter 3:8

- All levels of church leadership need to be prepared for the long road ahead.
- We need to be equipped with knowledge and information to help our congregations cope with the changing nature of this time. We need to know what our local health officials and state governments are saying, as well as our diocesan policies.
- We all need to take the actions needed to stay healthy: physically, emotionally, spiritually, so that we may run the race that is set before us.

Season One: Our current reality - stay home, stay healthy

We have been in this season since mid-March. As I stated above, we will continue in our present pattern of worship and behavior to help mitigate the spread of the virus at least until the end of May. We do this not only for ourselves, but for the sake of our neighbors.

Health Characteristics

- Widespread virus in many of our communities
- Government orders to stay home
- Lack of vaccine or therapeutics
- Lack of protective supplies for public

Congregational Protocols

- Virtual worship and home worship materials from our congregations and diocese
- Limited outreach ministries with safe protocols in place
- Increased pastoral care by virtual mediums
- Model stay home, stay safe. Model safe behavior for the sake of love of neighbor

Season two: Continues mitigation and slow lifting of restrictions

This involves the initial stages of returning - note that this might include several of the government stages and might take place over different time frames across the diocese.

Health Characteristics

- Waiting for a sustained reduction in cases for 14 days
- Hospitals are able to treat all patients requiring inpatient care
- Increased testing for COVID-19
- Able to conduct active monitoring of confirmed cases and their contacts
- Governmental agencies providing oversight and guidance

Congregational Protocols

- Church as an employer:
 - Follow all governmental requirements for business, including physical distancing and allowing employees to work from home.
- Worship

- Smaller congregations might be able to gather for worship if their space allows for strict physical distancing, and as long as [CDC guidelines and all sanitation protocols](#) are in place and followed.
- As this time continues, scalable worship, of 10, 50, 100 - may begin and continue in virtual spaces and spaces large enough for physical distancing.
- It is possible that the use of outdoor space will assist in being present together for worship.
- No choirs or congregational singing is allowed, soloists observing additional physical distancing are allowed. As time continues, it might be possible to allow for singing by choirs and congregations.
- Initially, Morning Prayer will continue.
 - As time continues, it might be possible that the Holy Eucharist may resume with modifications, this will not be in the beginning of this season, and only when allowed by the Bishop's office.
- No physical contact between people who are not living together is allowed, including during the passing of the peace.
- No passing of the collection plates is allowed.
- Ongoing diocesan offerings of virtual and home worship.
- Diocesan and congregational meetings done virtually as much as possible, and in accordance with health guidelines.
- In-person pastoral visits may resume to low risk parishioners as needed.
- As this time continues, some outside groups may be able to return to our buildings, as long as the space allows for strict physical distancing, and as long as CDC guidelines, and all sanitation protocols are in place and followed.

No congregation may resume in person worship until their specific plans for doing so have been approved by the Bishop's Office.

Any outbreaks of the virus might mean returning to strict stay home protocols.

Season Two may last for many months. The John Hopkins Center for Health Security advises that we “recognize that the desire to get back to normal as quickly as possible is a common reaction in the catastrophic context, and it is an impulse worth restraining.”

We cannot ignore that super-spreading events have been linked to religious services and choir practices. We still do not know much about COVID-19, one of the most consistent findings is that the disease carries a much higher fatality rate among older adults. According to data from the CDC, 91 percent of all deaths related to the virus have occurred among people 55 and older.

Season 3: Lifting of all physical distancing with protection

I do not expect season three to happen for some time, although I pray that it is sooner. According to more reports, this might be as long as 18 months away.

Health characteristics

- Negative community spread
- Mass vaccination
- Mass testing for virus and immunity
- Lifting of physical distancing

Congregational Protocols

- Congregational offices are fully open
- Worship in congregations
 - Continue to provide virtual options
 - Continue to provide virtual meeting options
 - Holy Eucharist is offered
- Resume outreach ministries
- Continue formation programs
- Diocesan home worship materials will continue
- Diocesan meetings continue to provide virtual options

Coordinate all plans with the Bishop's Office. Outbreaks of the virus may mean returning to previous protocols

Season Four: Application of learnings and future preparations

We need to capture the lessons we are learning all throughout this time so that we may meet our future better prepared for mission and ministry and the possibility of another pandemic. We are not seeking to simply return to the way things used to be. With the spiritual and practical lessons we are learning we can continue to move with confidence as we follow Jesus together in the way of love. We are learning what we need to know now and into the future as we continue to form disciples of Jesus Christ in strong communities of faith.

We will start as needed in our congregations, and continue to develop:

- Platforms for live streaming and uploading our worship
- Platforms for gathering online
- Meetings and programs that are accessible online in real time
- Becoming more quickly responsive and adaptable to a changing world
- Increased interdependence and interconnectedness

No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins. Mark 2:21-22

A Call to Action

We have seen that this pandemic is taking a heavier toll on communities of color, the poor, and the homeless. This is not unexpected. In all difficult situations, even mildly challenging ones, these friends, neighbors, and church goers are the ones who suffer the most. We need to raise them up because they are equally God's children. Let us envision and work for a future where the suffering of one is understood to be the suffering of all. Let us work to alleviate the suffering that is present in our world.

We have also seen that many of the workers who receive the lowest wages and least benefits like food workers, meat packers, delivery workers, and others are now “essential.” They are literally risking their lives for the benefit of the larger community. They deserve the thanks and respect of the larger community, increased wages and benefits, that befits their essential status. Let us work to ensure all have the ability to receive adequate pay and benefits.

We have also seen the benefit of not having so many people driving on our roads. The air is cleaner around the world. People are able to breathe more easily; incidence of respiratory distress is much lower. Let us continue to work for the healing of our creation.

We also need to ensure that we become advocates for a US health system that is prepared to face new pandemics. This will mean advocating for “research and development initiatives, expansion of public-health and health care infrastructure and workforce, and clear governance structures to execute strong preparedness plans. We have learned that viruses do not care what level of insurance you have or where you get it from, and anyone can be a carrier of disease. Let us remember that “your health is my health” and work to ensure that all people have access to adequate health care.

We have been called to follow Jesus together in the way of love, and we will continue to follow together. This road might be rockier than we anticipated right now, I can think of no better companions on the way that I would rather be with than all of you.

Blessings to you all in this time, and as we move with confidence through the seasons ahead.

Faithfully,

+Gretchen
IX Spokane



The Episcopal Diocese
of Spokane

Episcopal Diocese of Spokane
245 E. 13th Ave
Spokane, Washington 99202-1114