



The Episcopal Diocese of Western North Carolina

March 14, 2020

As our nation and our world endeavors to respond with care to the rapidly growing coronavirus pandemic, I want you to know that I am wrestling with what it means to be Church at this time in history.

Jesus said to his friends on the night before he was betrayed, “Do this in remembrance of me.”

Ever since the first Easter, being Church included the bold, public witness of Jesus’ disciples, through word and deed, that in Christ’s resurrection God triumphed over death and makes all things new.

Indeed, countless saints in the early Church risked their lives to boldly gather together as the body of the risen Christ to pray, study Holy Scriptures and share in Holy Communion.

And, still, those same holy men and holy women shaped our understanding that being Church is also about participating in God’s mission to restore all things to new life and going where Jesus went and following in his way of love. Those holy men and holy women, by their own life and death, call us to remember that what it means to be God’s people has a lot to do with engaging the world to honor and reconnect all the disparate parts of the human family, back into communion with one another.

Over the past twenty four hours, many dioceses in The Episcopal Church, including the two other dioceses in North Carolina as well as the synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and districts in the United Methodist Church in North Carolina have begun instructing their local congregations to suspend worship for the next several weeks as one of the ways the Christian community can participate in limiting the spread of the virus.

After much prayer, extensive conversation with sister and brother bishops, consultation with the Standing Committee and other clergy and lay leaders in our Diocese, I am requesting that all Episcopal Churches in Western North Carolina suspend public worship effective immediately until the end of the month, with the hope of resuming public worship on Palm Sunday. I am grateful for every priest, deacon and lay leader who has faithfully wrestled with how best to care for and serve their congregations and know that I stand ready to assist you all especially as we make this adjustment.

Please understand that this decision was not made lightly. I have wrestled with this issue for a number of days. Personally, I truly dislike the idea of setting aside this essential element of our faith – and I grieve, as I am sure we all do, halting, even for a short period of time, the public worship of the living God, the holy practice of remembering Jesus in bread and wine, and the physical act of consuming the life and love of our Lord. I recognize that this decision may not be popular with some. The challenge in our Church is how to honor the authority of a local congregation while also making decisions for the good of the larger community. In the end, I hear Jesus' words “Do this in remembrance of me” as a call to serve and care for our neighbors, especially those at most risk.

Even still, like the Communion of Saints who have gone before us, I recognize this is an opportunity to be Church in new ways that maintain our ancient common call to reconcile all things to God. I invite all of us to consider how we can boldly witness the love of Jesus, especially continuing to provide care to the needy and vulnerable in our wider communities. I encourage you to support, whether financially or in person – as you are able and with every precaution – programs like your local church or neighborhood food pantries and homeless shelters; reach out to your next-door neighbors with notes or phone calls to check in on them; offer to pick up groceries or garden the front yard for those who cannot leave their homes. Each of these ideas and many others will not only strengthen our communities; they are also tangible ways we incarnate the love of Jesus. Please know, I will continue to support clergy and lay leaders to decide locally when it is appropriate to modify parish ministries and other events as needed.

I, along with the Diocesan Staff will be available to support and assist all congregations and communities in the diocese. At this time, the plan is to maintain a presence at our diocesan office, but we will provide more information should that change. Likewise, I will be looking at all Diocesan events and meetings in March and April and make decisions in the coming days of any alterations or cancellations.

And of course, as your pastor, I will be available for conversation and pastoral care to our clergy and lay leaders. Together, we will take this one day at a time.

Together with Diocesan staff, we will provide resources on the diocesan website and through other social media platforms on how we can stay connected with one another and serve those on the margins, who are most often at-risk during times of crisis.

This situation is incredibly fluid – evolving hourly – and I will continue to monitor things as they develop, providing regular updates and next steps. Please bear in mind, we just don't know what the situation will be at the end of this month, and I ask everyone to be patient as things evolve. Again, I encourage you to go to our website – www.diocesewnc.org/covid-19 – for regular updates and helpful tips.

Finally, let me make something perfectly clear, we are not closing down our churches and the diocese. We are not boarding up our windows and checking out for a few weeks. There is still work to be done; there are still people in our communities that need help; there are still ways in which we continue to be Church in the midst of this crisis. This is not a time for retreat, but for proclamation that despite this crisis, we stand firm in the hope of the resurrection and boldly proclaim by word and example, the love of Jesus and his promise of peace.

As the Apostle Paul proclaimed in his letter to the Church in Rome, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.” Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the prefix '+', a first name, and a last name, all written in a cursive, flowing script.

Bishop José