



The Episcopal Diocese of Western North Carolina

March 19, 2020

Good afternoon brothers and sisters in Christ.

The ancient Hebrew author of the Book of Proverbs wrote, “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.” (Proverbs 27:1)

Each day, each hour, brings updated information compelling all of us to adapt with new ways of living and being community. To that end, I want to share with you my newest pastoral directive to the Episcopal Church in Western North Carolina.

Two days ago, Governor Cooper issued an executive order that calls “all people to avoid social gatherings in groups of more than 10 people.” Likewise, the CDC recommends that no gatherings of 10 or more stay in effect for at least eight weeks.

Therefore, based on the states order as well as my daily conversations and briefings with health officials, diocesan clergy and lay leaders, I am instructing all parishes to suspend all public worship and other church gatherings until May 10.

The only exception to this pastoral directive is that, following every precaution, our churches continue to provide services to the homebound and all others at risk by providing food and shelter to those in need.

These are extraordinary times calling on us to care for each other and the world in ways that we are not accustomed to. As the Body of Christ, we remain connected in relationship and purpose; we find our strength through the power of the Holy Spirit, guiding us to tap into God’s divine creativity so that we may continue to reflect the light and love of Jesus into our new and present reality.

What I do know is that I am witnessing how many of you, in your own way, care for each other and for your neighbors. I am hearing from clergy and lay leaders around the diocese who are providing on-line worship, podcasts, drive through food pantries, video-conference youth gatherings, live-stream organ concerts, and the list goes on...all in an effort to be the Body of Christ in new ways.

I encourage you to continue to visit our COVID-19 page on our diocesan website, where we provide relevant and timely resources as we respond to this pandemic. On our website, you will not only find links to the most reliable health information but you will also find multiple resources for prayer, including parishes in our diocese that are offering on-line worship, as well as resources on how to stay centered in the midst of anxiety and connected to each other.

Likewise, what I do know is that we will need to financially support our local congregations as well as our neighborhood economies. Please continue to give your pledge to your parish, so that, in turn, your church leaders can financially support staff, including church musicians and sextons and youth leaders. Please explore ways you can also contribute to your local economy like getting lunch “to-go” from a neighborhood restaurant.

Finally, what I also know is that we won't be together for Holy Week and Easter. My heart aches with grief to not share in the gift of coming together, face-to-face, with other friends in Christ:

to process with palms, singing Hosanna;
to wash each other' feet on Maundy Thursday;
to sit in the stillness of a church marking the hours of Good Friday;
to gather around the Easter fire singing the Exultet;
and to gather together to sing “Alleluia, Christ is Risen.”

I invite every church in the Diocese to join together on Easter Sunday, April 11 at 10 a.m., to ring their church bells for five minutes as a resounding symbol of our faith in the grace of Jesus's resurrection and the gift of new life. I invite all households to find a bell or a drum or a kitchen pan and join with the church bells to make a joyful noise. Together we can send out soundwaves of hope in our communities and around the world.

My friends, we are still the Church and we are called to proclaim always and everywhere, even from our homes, the mercy, grace, hope and love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "José", with a small cross symbol to the left of the first letter.

Bishop José