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The  
Episcopal Diocese  
of New York

June 24, 2020

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I write to you one week before the July 1st date at which limited resumption of public worship will be permitted in the Diocese of New York. I want to say at the start that I have no expectation that churches will resume public worship at this time. A significant number of our churches and clergy are telling me that they do not intend to reintroduce worship inside their churches until September or the end of the year. I completely respect those decisions. From the start we have said that this is permission, not requirement. COVID is a very dangerous disease - fatal for too many - and a whole lot of our people, and our clergy, are high risk due to their age or underlying health conditions. Safety must be our first concern. We have learned how to have effective, enriching worship and a robust community life, even while distanced, over the last three months. Continuing those distanced practices and relationships until we see that it is safe to come physically together is a decision which is faithful and sensible. We are seeing that in other parts of our country which have “re-opened” early, churches are already being revealed to be centers of new infections. We cannot let that happen in our churches, and that means observing strict disciplines in our practices.

I am, in any event, asking that every church continue your electronic or “virtual” services as your primary worship offering, even if you begin to allow some in-person worship.

When notice of this permission was first given, the allowed gathering of people was ten persons. I said at that time that we would follow the rules and

guidelines of Governor Cuomo in determining the number of people who can come together in our churches. Those guidelines have expanded now to allow a gathering of people up to 25% of the capacity of your nave, so those newer guidelines will now be the policy of this diocese (that will soon change to 33%, but for now let's stay with 25%). Having said that, strict distancing inside the churches is expected. People who live in the same home may sit together, but beyond that, everyone must be six feet away from everyone else. That six foot requirement will override the 25% rule. We do not recommend congregational or choral singing at this time, but where there is singing of any kind, the distancing requirement increases to twelve feet.

Everyone must be masked, and hand sanitizer must be readily available and freely used. Worship spaces must be disinfected between gatherings (CDC guidelines for disinfecting spaces are available on the diocesan website), or left dormant for a full week between each service to allow any virus to dry up and die.

We want to come back together. We yearn for it. And I am confident that with strict distancing, masks properly worn (with nose and mouth completely covered) by everyone, hands thoroughly washed and sanitizers used, and spaces well cleaned and sanitized, we can come together in our churches safely until this period of COVID pandemic passes.

### **These directions in summary**

- 25% maximum capacity.
- Strict distancing
  - People from same home may sit together.
  - All others must be 6 feet apart – this overrides the 25% rule.
  - Congregational or choral singing not recommended – but if done, distancing must be 12 feet.
- Everyone must be masked.
- Hand sanitizer must be readily available and freely used.
- Worship spaces must be disinfected between gatherings or left dormant for a full week between each service.
- Please visit **[2020.diocesenyny.org](https://2020.diocesenyny.org)** for links to CDC and New York State reopening guidelines.

### **The Holy Eucharist**

As you know, only communion in one kind (the bread) will be permitted at this time. The cup will be introduced when we can establish practices which are certain to be safe, and we should all expect that that is going to take some time. I am also aware that there are worries about administering the bread too. A great number of proposals have come to me or circulated on social media about devices or tools for “touch-free” administration of the bread: tongs, dixie cups, and the machine which some have dubbed the “pez dispenser.” These innovations are not allowed, and it should be noticed that these focus only on developing a technical strategy for getting a piece of bread into another person’s mouth, and are not at all about the love, trust, vulnerability, tenderness and connection which underlie what we mean when we say “communion.”

Please administer the eucharistic bread the way we have done throughout our history, which is hand-to-hand (communion bread placed on the tongue is for obvious reasons forbidden). I am convinced, as are Bishops Allen and Mary, that good practices can enable us to do this safely.

There are certainly different ways to do this, but many clergy have asked for specific guidelines, so I would commend to our clergy:

1. Place the communion wafers (not pieces of “real” bread) on a paten, covered with a linen, and placed on the altar to the side of the fully-masked celebrant, outside the direction of his or her speaking voice, with only the priest’s host exposed. After the breaking of the bread, the priest’s host would be consumed by the celebrant alone, and not shared. A small amount of wine should also be consecrated, and consumed by the celebrant alone.
2. Immediately before distributing the bread to the people, the celebrant should wash his or her hands with soap and warm water in the sight of the people. As people approach the communion station, appropriately distanced, hand sanitizer should be available so that they may clean their hands immediately before receiving the host. The celebrant should regularly re-sanitize his or her hands while administering communion. Thoroughly cleaned hands will not pass disease.
3. Both the celebrant and all communicants should be masked throughout the eucharist. People should receive the host on their hands and then step back until they are appropriately distanced before lowering their mask to consume the host.
4. For the time being, the consecrated bread should be touched only by the celebrant, and only administered by the celebrant, and not by other priests, deacons or eucharistic ministers.

We are in a challenging and difficult season in the world, and it will pass. Until then, I am confident that these practices are safe, and will protect both the clergy and the people. I could not be more proud of the governance which our clergy and lay leaders have brought to the parishes, and of the quality of life and worship which you have maintained through this crisis. As we move into a new chapter now, we need to adjust to increased risk, and if we can do that with the same spirit and discipline which we have done so far, I am certain we will be okay. I long for the day when we can see each other face to face, and regather in filled churches, and raise our song. And gather one another into our arms. That day will come, but however difficult living with COVID is now, I am proud and privileged to walk this rough road with you. Bless you all, and until then I remain

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Andrew ML Dietsche". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a small cross-like mark at the beginning.

The Right Reverend Andrew ML Dietsche  
Bishop of New York