



The Episcopal Diocese of New York

OPEN DOORS: THE PATH TOWARD RESUMING PUBLIC WORSHIP

May 24, 2020

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the second week of March it became suddenly very obvious that we were going to have to suspend public worship for an indefinite time, and we did. No one went to their files and pulled out their “pandemic plan.” This kind of epidemic has been unprecedented for over a century, and we had no preparation for it. However, it has been so profoundly moving to me to have seen every one of our parishes at once begin to figure out how to continue our essential outreach ministries, our rich life of prayer, our bible studies, and even our coffee hours. On March 8 we were at our altars and in our pews, and seven days later we were offering worship through zooming and live streaming. We did this virtually without notice.

The creativity of every church, of all of our priests and deacons, and of the leaders of our congregations, to turn on a dime and adapt to a fantastically changing world is the surest sign for me of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst, and of the faith and courage of our community, as we approach our celebration of the Pentecost. I could not be prouder of you, I could not be more inspired by you. We have continued across the diocese to feed the hungry, the poor and the newly unemployed. We have buried the dead. We have invited all the world into our worship, and they have come. My own constant companions over these weeks have been my colleague bishops Allen Shin and Mary Glasspool. Their wisdom and help, along with that of my staff, has enabled the diocesan office and ministers (albeit scattered) to remain productive at the highest level, and to provide ongoing pastoral care and practical helps to all of our churches.

Now we are about to enter the next chapter of this story, as we prepare to resume, carefully and cautiously, a life of in-person public worship. For the last few weeks, Allen and Mary and I have met with a committee made up of some members of my senior staff, to develop policies and guidelines for the return of our churches to public worship. This letter represents the fruit of that deliberation, so far. As much as possible, we hope to allow for the greatest freedom for local planning and decisions. You will find here a few policy decisions which will apply to everyone, but more of this letter will provide guidelines to help shape your own thinking amid the many differing contexts and cultures of our two hundred churches.

Please note that this letter is being published today in English, but as soon as possible we will have this translated into Spanish in full.

REGARDING RE-OPENING

- FIRM DATE: NO PUBLIC WORSHIP AT ALL BEFORE JULY 1

- AFTER JULY 1, STATE GUIDELINES WILL DETERMINE THE NUMBERS OF PEOPLE PERMITTED
- INITIALLY, NO DIFFERING ALLOWANCES FOR INDOOR AND OUTDOOR SERVICES
- RESUMPTION OF PUBLIC WORSHIP ON JULY 1 IS PERMITTED, BUT NOT REQUIRED
- ALL LOCAL DECISIONS REGARDING RESUMPTION WILL BE RESPECTED BY THIS BISHOP
- PRIORITIES:
 - FIRST - SAFETY OF CLERGY AND PEOPLE, AND SELF-CARE OF ALL MINISTERS
 - SECOND - RESUMPTION OF IN-PERSON WORSHIP
 - THEN - CONTINUING OF ESSENTIAL OUTREACH MINISTRIES
 - THEN - RESUMPTION OF PROGRAMMING AND OFFICE SERVICES
 - FINALLY - ACCOMMODATION OF OUTSIDE GROUPS

At the end of April, together with the bishops of the Diocese of Long Island, we bishops of New York came to the decision that we must extend the suspension of public worship until July 1. We believed, and still do, that the postponement of “re-opening” was the appropriately cautious and responsible choice, knowing as we do that whenever we resume church gatherings we will do so during a still active (albeit waning) pandemic, and a virus which has as of this writing taken almost 100,000 American lives. It also is not to be forgotten that New York City and the surrounding area became, and remain, the world-wide epicenter of this pandemic. It is easy sometimes to minimize the danger of COVID, since most people who contract it will survive, but for those who do not, this disease is the end of the world. I have laid awake at night listening to the overlapping multiple sirens roaring up Amsterdam Avenue - too many to count - and only now is the constant background din of sirens in New York City beginning to diminish. We must approach these next steps with profound humility before a relentless adversary.

In the last week Governor Cuomo has given permission for worship services to be held in gatherings of no more than ten people, and President Trump has ordered that all houses of worship re-open immediately. Those statements are informative for us, but not determinative. Our thinking has not changed, and we continue to be clear in the dioceses of both New York and Long Island that in-person or public worship may resume, under appropriate restrictions and limitations, on or after July 1, but not before. After we pass July 1, the limit on the number of people allowed to come together for worship will conform to government requirements and guidelines (which is, at this time, ten), and we expect those restrictions to loosen as we continue to work our way through this season of crisis. At this time we do not expect to have different requirements for worship inside the church and outside, though after July 1 we will strongly encourage outdoor services (masked and distanced) for all churches which have sufficient space to do so.

I want to say too that no church is required to resume public worship on July 1. This is permission, but not requirement. For most of our churches, holding services for fewer than ten people may be seen as significantly less effective than continuing the digital worship which has enabled parishes so wonderfully to draw their whole communities, along with visitors and seekers, together in prayer. Churches may want to consider the continuation of electronic worship on Sundays and introduce the allowed small in-person gatherings initially for small mid-week worship, and only when you are ready to do so. I do not want any clergyperson or parish to feel compelled to do anything which you believe will put you at too high a risk. My first and highest priority is and will always be the safety of our clergy and people - and secondly, the return to public worship. After that will come the resumption of programming, office services and outreach ministries in our church buildings. And finally, our accommodation of and hospitality toward outside groups. Do not try to do everything at once, but let us develop phased, gradual, and unhurried returns to our customary lives. Above all, be safe and keep your people safe. This crisis is not going to end in 2020. We are in this for the long haul, and we owe it to ourselves and our people to be gentle on ourselves and with one another.

I also want to tell every parish and vestry that I expect you to provide for sabbath rest and earned vacation for your priests, even as we continue to navigate these troubled waters. I know exactly the level of stress they have been carrying, and recovery time given to them now is an investment in their continued health and leadership.

PREPARATION AND FORESIGHT

- REQUIRED: AVAILABILITY AND UNIVERSAL USE OF MASKS AND HAND SANITIZERS
ONGOING DISINFECTION OF PUBLIC SPACES IN CHURCHES
DISTANCING TO BE OBSERVED AT ALL TIMES
WARDENS RESPONSIBLE FOR ALL SAFETY PROTOCOLS
- RECOMMENDED: OVERSIGHT COMMITTEES TO SET AND FACILITATE POLICY
MARKS AND BARRIERS IN CHURCH TO GUIDE AND ENFORCE DISTANCING
- YET TO COME: VIDEO TUTORIAL ON MASK MAKING
PROTOCOLS FOR CHURCH DISINFECTION AND SANITIZATION

As we anticipate returning to our church buildings, there are things every church should be doing now. In-person worship will require the wearing of masks (fully covering the mouth and nose) by clergy, assisting ministers, and the whole congregation during the entire time people are in the church. Creating an inventory of masks now will help you prepare for the day when you will re-open your doors. All who are able should come to the church masked, but parishes will need to provide masks to those who do not have them. There is greater availability of commercial masks now than there was even a few weeks ago, but it is also possible for parish volunteers to make masks. A number of people - ordained and lay - across our diocese have been making an astonishing number of masks during these weeks, and within days we will be offering a video tutorial to demonstrate the fabrication of simple effective masks. Parishes will also need to have a great deal of hand sanitizer on hand, and we recommend placing bulk orders for both hand sanitizer and disinfectants now. Ensuring that these safety protocols are observed by everyone will be the responsibility of the parish wardens.

Physical distancing will be required inside the church. You should consider reserving one or two empty pews between full pews, and dividing the aisle into six-foot increments with tape. The Peace should be exchanged without physical touch. You should consider whether it will be possible to hold coffee hour at all, and in what form.

Churches will have to be regularly disinfected, and we are developing cleaning protocols adaptable to any parish setting, for sanitizing doorknobs, pews, bathrooms, liturgical resources, etc. That protocol will be provided to you well before the July re-openings. Plans for identifying who and how that cleaning and disinfecting will happen in your church should be worked out now. Churches should consider putting coordinating committees together to oversee these processes.

We do not recommend the use of thermometers at the door of the church, or of any other "test" to determine who might or might not be infected. Generally our church officers and ushers are unqualified to make medical diagnoses, and many who contract COVID remain asymptomatic. Do not forget that the fabric of the church exists on a foundation of trust and welcome. Having said that, everyone should be told that if they are unwell or feel sick they should not come to church.

THE HOLY EUCHARIST

- REQUIRED: FOR THE TIME BEING, COMMUNION IN ONE KIND IS MANDATED
SACRAMENTAL WINE TO BE RESERVED TO THE CELEBRANT ONLY

**MASKS REQUIRED AT THE ALTAR
BREAD HANDLED ONLY BY CELEBRANT AND COMMUNICANT
HAND SANITATION REQUIRED FOR COMMUNICATING**

- RECOMMENDED: CONTINUE INITIALLY NON-EUCHARISTIC PRACTICES OF WORSHIP
PHASED RE-INTRODUCTION OF THE EUCHARIST

We encourage churches, when you begin to hold in-person services, not to go eucharistic immediately. It is going to take a little time for people to adjust to the distancing and hygienic requirements of being back together. Morning Prayer, which has enjoyed something of a renaissance during this period of distance worship, requires far less moving around than the Eucharist, and we would commend at least several weeks of non-eucharistic worship before embarking on the greater logistic complications of celebrating the Eucharist.

It will be the practice of the churches of the Diocese of New York, without exception, that the Holy Eucharist, when it is reintroduced, will be administered in one kind - meaning that the celebrant at the altar, fully masked, will consecrate sufficient bread for the gathered congregation, along with just a swallow of wine, which the celebrant and the celebrant only will consume alone. We recommend that the bread be offered only in the form of hosts so as to reduce handling, and that the bread on the altar be covered with a linen, and placed so that it is not under or before the face of the celebrant while he or she is speaking. The practice of communion in one kind will be the policy of the diocese for the foreseeable future, and not a decision which you may adapt or disregard locally. We believe that with scrupulous sanitation of the hands of the celebrant immediately before and during the administration of communion (and for the time being there should be only one person administering the bread), and of the hands of the communicants, the host may be administered safely. To that end, no one but the celebrant is to touch the communion bread. We are not ready yet to institute a protocol for the return of the common cup, but we will in time. To the degree that we are able, our practices of communion will continue as they always have been, without the invention, under the rubric of "COVID emergency," of novel or alien practices (e.g. the use of paper cups) inconsistent with our sacramental practices and theology.

MUSIC

It is impossible to imagine church without singing. And it is disturbing to think that the great traditions of choral music in this diocese may be silenced for awhile. We were shocked when the government of Germany forbade singing in church, but we have learned that singing is one of the most effective ways of spreading droplets and aerosol. We have no counsel for this, except to say that we must yet find ways to include music in worship. We encourage everyone to share their ideas and their wisdom, so that we may find together ways to make a joyful noise without becoming yet another vector for disease.

Consider appropriately distanced instrumentalists, soloists and small ensembles in lieu of full choirs (but remembering that they will be counted among the ten who are allowed). Consider the use of recorded music. Congregational singing is not advised in most circumstances. Be creative, imagine possibilities, remember still to be joyful in adversity and loss.

WELCOMING THE STRANGER AT THE GATE

- RECOMMENDED: CONTINUE DIGITAL AND VIRTUAL WORSHIP.
MAKE EXPLICIT INVITATION TO SEEKERS AND EXPLORERS.

For all my sixty-six years, those ubiquitous signs in every community - "The Episcopal Church Welcomes you" - have been a talisman for me. They are comfort food for the eyes, and when I drive into a new town and see that sign I know I am home. And our church doors, often painted

bright red, have been invariably open and welcoming to the stranger and the friend, the guest and the curious, and the seeker after God. Many of you have noticed during these last many weeks of digital worship and programming the great number of people, beyond the size of your own congregations, who have tuned in to your worship. Who are they? We must think of them as invisible, but very real, members of our churches. Out at the edges, but taking first steps into our communities. A return to in-person worship which is so limited in numbers will give little allowance for welcoming the newcomer and the stranger. But as we continue to move closer and closer over these next months to churches filling again with people, please do not forget those many who have joined us along the way. Continue your digital prayers and programs, that those who have found there an entry into the kingdom will still know how to find us, and how to approach the church and community, and so that they may remember where they were fed when we were all in the wilderness. And consider, even now when our numbers are under forced limitations, reserving a seat or two for the seeker, the newcomer, the guest.

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All of this represents the very first steps, during a continuing pandemic, of a longer journey toward full churches and the fantastic practices of worship which have been our life and will be again, and which have always characterized the Episcopal Church. Long, long ago our church opened the Bible and it fell open to the verse "Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness," and we found in those words our special character, our heart, the expression of our best selves and deepest longings. It's going to feel different now. In most of our churches we are used to looking out and seeing people in most of the pews; dozens or hundreds of people; full choral offerings and robust singing; people clustered side by side at the altar rail; kids running all over the place. Seeing instead ten people widely spaced in cavernous churches, with limited music, and without the profound solace and grace of human touch is going to shock us. It will not feel like church as we have known it. Please remember, and let us remind one another, that these are steps along the way in the courageous and sublime Return from Exile onto which we now embark. It is going to take time, and it cannot be hurried, so be forgiving of one another, and generous of spirit. We have fantastically continued to be the church during the hardest days of sirens and isolation and so many people dying, and we will bring that same spirit to our glorious Coming Back Together. Be blessed, and be a blessing.

Mary and Allen and I talk all the time about the loss we are experiencing in not being able to make parish visitations, and in suspending the sacramental practice of confirmation. We will come through this crisis, and we will have a full church life again. We your bishops long to see you, and look to God to make it so. Until then, we remain

Yours,

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Andy

The Right Reverend Andrew ML Dietsche
Bishop of New York