

Bishop's Pastoral Directive
Regathering for In-Person Indoor Worship
Feast of the Epiphany 2021

My Beloved Diocesan Family,

In my previous Pastoral Directive issued in December, I communicated to the diocese that parishes are advised to suspend In-Person Worship Indoors. This was an extremely painful decision, needless to say, one that needed to be made under the prevailing wisdom regarding the COVID 19 Virus and the exponential increase in the infection rate. You would recall that, at the time of the directive, all twenty-four jurisdictions remained in the **RED ZONE** as reported by Maryland state officials. We were further advised that the limit on number of persons allowed in any gathering was ten (10) and under. The diocese permitted up to fifteen (15) to facilitate parishes' pre-planned Christmas Programs and parishes have diligently and respectfully adhered to this and all the protocols established by the diocese. This collaborative effort on the part of everyone necessitates genuine admiration and overwhelming gratitude. I am deeply impressed by and thankful for the creativity and faithfulness to the Gospel-message of love displayed by our clergy, lay-leaders and parishioners.

We have a new year and with that comes a sense of renewed hope and optimism for a new mindset and aptitude for a new normal and possible change of course. The world, country and diocese have learned much as a result of our consistent engagement with the many variables associated with the virus. As people of hope who are equipped with the love of Jesus and his gospel message of light overcoming darkness, we are called to proclaim and reflect in our daily life this life-changing and life-giving good news. In recent weeks the announcement and subsequent administering of an efficacious vaccine complement this new life and light of Christ in a pandemic, both reasons for optimism.

Spirit of the Season of Epiphany

The Season of Epiphany is upon us, a season that is historically and traditionally associated with LIGHT, and light is associated with an overwhelming gift of JOY and inner PEACE because of Christ who is the LIGHT and HOPE. The world quite naturally looks toward Jesus, the symbol of Light, in a world besieged by the heaviness of darkness. Christ is the HOPE of the world struggling through a time of division and pandemic. Jesus calls his followers to become a living force for all humanity, as lights shining in the world, radiant lights standing beside Jesus.

The Church has for over centuries used the medium of *symbolism* to manifest or communicate faith-given truths about life it professes in Jesus. The theology of symbolism has served as a critical and powerful evangelistic and spiritual instrument for gospel proclamation, formation, transformation, and conversion. Churches are replete with these signposts that rivet our focus into deeper TRUTH - icons, stained glass windows, sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion (water, wine and bread), and the list goes on – all are symbols of a deeper articulation of faith and spirituality. Grace is communicated to the faithful through the visible signs of sacramental sanctification (see Catechism – The Sacraments BCP -857 & Articles of Religion XXVII – 872). When

words are insufficient to communicate hidden truths of God, we find solace and comfort through intentionally engaging the *principle of symbolism*.

In this *spirit of symbolism*, the Diocese of Easton wishes to communicate to the world and neighborhood that we are people of faith who trust in the Light and Hope that is manifested in this Season of Epiphany. Our churches will remain beacons of this all-powerful force, Jesus, who penetrates the heaviness of darkness to dispel the fear of the unknown invisible enemy - COVID 19.

Pursuant to the fact that Governor Larry Hogan has not directed closure of the State of Maryland, I am directing the official re-opening of churches for In-Person Indoor Gathering for worship effective Sunday, January 10, First Sunday of Epiphany, under the approved limit in the number of people mandated by State and/or local jurisdiction - ten (10) worshippers.

In addition, parishes may be permitted up to ten (10) additional persons representing clergy, lector, musicians, choir members, altar guild, technical team, and ushers. This worship team limitation is left to the discretion of individual parish leadership. In all circumstances, the Diocesan Protocols/Guidelines, which has served us exceptionally well over the preceding months must be observed in their strictest compliance. I am convinced that adherence to these protocols, combined with the limited number of parishioners permitted to attend, would not be cause for ‘super spreader’ concerns. Additionally, over the preceding ten months, the diocesan family, clergy, and laity, have demonstrated resilience, creativity, adaptability, astute care and welfare for the health and safety of the people of God. Furthermore, parishes have expended significant resources from their preciously limited financial reserves to upgrade their HVAC system to be compliant with COVID-19 requirements.

As bishop, I am investing my hope and confidence in God’s Spirit to guide, sustain and protect our efforts. Equally, I am investing those same sentiments in the clergy and lay leadership of the parishes who have been nothing short of stunningly faithful, and responsible in the pastoral care offered to God’s faithful under their care. I am aware that with the present state restrictions which limit the number permitted for in-person indoor gatherings, this message may simply be interpreted as *symbolic*. Nevertheless, this gesture is an important statement of our faith as well as a tangible and definitive demonstration of the James’ caveat, “faith without works is dead” (James 2:14-26).

Employing the historic Anglican Communion practice of the Principle of Subsidiarity, parishes are permitted to increase the number of worshippers for In-Person Indoor Church attendance as the state and/or local jurisdiction correspondingly increases its limitation. The Principle of Subsidiarity is based upon the premise that, matters close to the local level should be decided at the local level because scenarios operating in one jurisdiction may intrinsically differ to another area. Our diocese covers nine (9) jurisdictions across the Eastern shore of Maryland. The United States of America is designed under the principle of subsidiarity.

Parishes are to continue their online streaming of worship and parochial activities and continue the use of the Pastoral Exception issued at Christmas. This directive doesn’t

interrupt or impede the stellar creative and pioneering ministry parishes have been doing for the past ten (10) months. When gathered in person, continue wearing the protective mask, social distancing, sanitizing, limiting numbers, and administering Holy Communion to worshippers in one kind – BREAD.

Please be advised, parish leadership may choose to remain closed to In-Person Indoor Gathering for Worship should it determine it is their preferential route at this time.

Finally, the story of the Magi's visit to the Holy Family in Bethlehem is a classic demonstration of the signs of light and hope, in an otherwise dysfunctional Roman controlled world order, oppressed by imperial power and monarchical authority in the likes of Emperor Caesar and King Herod. Life was expendable at the command of a despotic dictator – even the destruction of innocent harmless children commemorated in the Church on the Feast of Holy Innocents, December 29.

The Magi followed the LIGHT of a star in order to meet Jesus. One of the theological and spiritual treasures gained from their visit was they returned to their home a different route, translated in the language of faith – *no one meets Jesus and remains the same*. He is the Sign of HOPE in this pandemic. Let this message of hope and light overcoming darkness be the divine reason and impetus for re-opening our churches, albeit, under severely subdued and strict protocol. This may be an important *symbolic* message this church conveys in this Season of Epiphany, a season overwhelmingly inspired by the theology of symbolism.

My beloved, I prayerfully believe that the wisdom of the Spirit is actively guiding this decision, and humbly ask you to continue to pray for me your friend and servant bishop.

Let us Pray:

O God, by the leading of a star you manifest your only Son to the people of the earth: Lead us, who know you now by faith, to your presence, where we may see your glory face to face; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, on God, now and for ever. Amen

Together in Christ's service,

+San