



The Episcopal Diocese of Bethlehem

The Rt. Rev. Kevin D. Nichols, *Bishop*

Dear Friends in Christ,

We have just passed a grim milestone in the COVID-19 pandemic – over 500,000 deaths nationwide, 24,000 of them in Pennsylvania alone, and just over 4,000 in the area comprising the diocese of Bethlehem. Each of these represents a life lost, a family grieving, a community diminished. In our diocese, several of our beloved clergy have been infected and have, mercifully, survived. Few of our parishes remain untouched by the pandemic. Some have lost one or more parishioners. There is no doubt that in our small communities, the loss of even one Christian has a dramatic impact.

These losses deepen the sense of loss we encounter because of our necessary response to the pandemic. In a Church where common prayer is fundamental to who we are and how we live, shuttered churches portend a real threat to our existence as communities of faith. And yet, we find solace in the long history of God and God's people: every time God's faithful people faced great hazard, God has proved again and again to be a God who is strong to save.

Bishop Kevin has, throughout the crisis, consulted broadly with the representatives of the people of the diocese through Diocesan Council and Standing Committee. We, your chosen leadership, continue to look at the data, sound out "the person in the pew", and together consider a reasonable way forward. At our most recent meetings, we were happy to hear of improving conditions throughout the diocese: decreasing positivity rates, the slowing of infection, declining mortality, and an increase in vaccinations. While glimmers of hope emerge, it is equally clear that as the finish line soon comes into view, the race is not yet won.

We all hear public health officials express cautious optimism, yet always with a warning: we cannot relax our resolve. Mitigation efforts (masking, social distancing, minimizing large group gatherings) must continue unabated in the near future. Along with the increasing administration of effective vaccines, these efforts strengthen our capacity to overcome current obstacles so that we may begin planning to gather once more.

We are profoundly aware that even as circumstances appear to improve, we are not even near the levels that prompted our original response in March 2020. It is true that our knowledge base has increased over time and we better understand what is involved. No one expects that we will be able to contain the impact of the virus totally before we return to a "new normal."

However, we have advised that we continue our current mitigation efforts until we are confident that we can emerge with reasonable safety.

Specifically, we will:

- Continue to limit large group activities, including worship, at current levels;
- Continue to monitor regions of the diocese to assess progress;
- Consider modifications as circumstances improve.

Additionally, we have counselled against setting a date for returning. We have learned that doing so in the face of unpredictable circumstances can cause deep hurt and disappointment. However, we strongly urge parish leadership – clergy and vestries alike – to use this time to consider *creatively* how each parish will meet the challenges that we will face as we emerge from our COVID exile. Specifically, we ask each to consider and plan for:

- How we will gather differently and better because of our experience.
- How we will reconnect with the larger community through mission and outreach.
- How we will consider priorities related to mission and ministry in light of our new circumstances.

In all of this we are reminded of the words of Saint Paul in his letter to the Romans:

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:37-29

Please be assured, we are all most eager once more to embrace at the sign of peace, to sing out with full voice hymns both ancient and modern, and most of all to gather at the Holy Table to acknowledge that “There is one Body and one Spirit; one hope in God’s call to us; one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism; one God and Father of all.” We eagerly anticipate that day with you.

Sincerely,

Standing Committee

The Rev. Jane Bender-St. Margaret’s, Emmaus

Liza Holzinger-St. Andrew’s, Allentown

The Rev. Doug Moyer-President

The Rev. Van Bankston-Good Shepherd, Milford

Lynne Graham-St. Paul’s, Montrose

Carol C. McMullen-St. Luke’s, Scranton

The Rev. Earl Trygar-Grace Church, Kingston

Diocesan Council

The Rev. Timothy Alleman-St. Stephen’s
Pro-Cathedral & Holy Cross, Wilkes-Barre

The Rev. Melinda Artman-Redeemer, Sayre

Matthew Malani-St. Stephen’s Pro-Cathedral,
Wilkes-Barre

The Rev. Michelle Moyer-Cathedral Church of
the Nativity, Bethlehem

Sara McNelis-Grace Church, Kingston

The Rev. Jane Williams-St. Andrew’s, Allentown

Melissa Amator-Trinity, Easton

Jim Harding-St. Anne’s, Trexlertown

Ross Mangina-Trinity, Bethlehem

Rebecca McLaughlin-St. Mark’s, Moscow

The Rev. Margaret Pendergast-Christ Church, Reading

The Rev. Dr. David A. Zwifka-St. Luke’s, Lebanon

Bishop

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