March 12, 2020

Beloved in Christ,

On Wednesday, March 11, 2020, I met with 184 clergy of the diocese in two ZOOM conference calls to convey an important message about the novel coronavirus and to answer questions about my decision. The notice for the calls was very short and not all clergy were able to take part. I therefore summarize my words and the answers to questions in this communication. Attached you will find a variety of resources which will help you in making the decisions that are before you and in planning worship for the next two Sundays.

**My message to the clergy on the ZOOM call was this:**

"As the coronavirus spreads, we are called as people of faith to protect one another, particularly the most vulnerable among us. As a step toward doing this, I have made the informed decision that we should not physically gather for worship in our church buildings for the next two weeks, between now and March 25. Toward the end of that period, we will assess the situation and adjust as necessary.

"An early version of a Washington Post online article says that we have 'closed' our churches for two weeks. That is not correct. Churches may and should remain open unless told otherwise by local health officials. Church staff may come to work. We will not, however, gather physically for public worship."
"Why? The coronavirus is now a pandemic and we are responsible for one another, especially the most vulnerable among us. Mathematical models show that the virus is spreading exponentially. We can’t stop the spread, but we can slow it, thereby saving lives and helping ensure that our healthcare system remains effective. Social distancing is our best means of slowing the spread. The Diocese of Washington has made the same decision as COVID-19 cases increase in the DC urban and suburban areas.

"This is not the first time our churches have suspended public worship. One hundred two years ago, the bishops of Virginia cancelled visitations and churches were closed for two to six weeks during the great flu epidemic. As it was then, these are extraordinary and unusual times. They require extraordinary and unusual measures.

"While we won’t gather in our churches of public worship these next two Sundays, God will be worshipped and praised. We will send you resources for virtual worship with a variety options for churches of every size. I encourage you to talk with and share ideas with nearby congregations.

"Do not be afraid. God is good. God is leading us and guiding us even now—especially now. God is teaching us how to be Church in ways that might not be comfortable, but in ways that will be faithful."

Questions that clergy on the Zoom call asked, and answers I gave, are as follows:

"When do the two weeks end; March 22 or March 25?" And "what is the plan after the two weeks end?"

March 25. This period includes two Sundays in Lent. You might think of this time as a Lenten fast for the sake of the wider community. Again, we will reassess and communicate before March 25, based on the most up to date information.
How is this going to apply to Church Schools in the Diocese of Virginia? Pre-schools in churches?
The head of each of our Church Schools is making the appropriate decision for that school. Decisions may differ depending on whether the school is boarding or day. We will share those decisions with you once they have been made. David Charlton, President of Church Schools in the Diocese of Virginia has said, "I think all of our schools will at least extend spring breaks."

If your church sponsors or rents to a preschool, talk with the director and board of that school and make your best decision. Share your thinking with other clergy in your area whose congregations have preschools. If we receive from health authorities a general recommendation about preschools, we will pass it on.

What is recommended for small groups?
While we recommend that all meetings be done electronically for a time, small groups may meet at the discretion of the members. Be sure to exercise all of the best practices for care. What size constitutes a "small group?" Social distancing principles suggest that there should be 6 feet between people. So the size of the room and the size of the group need to be considered. The age and health of those who would gather would need to be considered as well. Some Episcopal and Lutheran bishops have urged congregations to cancel all face to face meetings, no matter the size of the group. I ask you to consider that option, and to make your best decision for the health of all. It is wise to err on the side of caution in a global pandemic.

"We have our community theater show opening this weekend and running through the 23rd. Should I assume that if we are closing for worship, that we should also close the show?"
We recommend postponing. This is about protecting the community. Best approach is to meet with the director or the organization and make your best decision.
What do we do about funerals?
Where possible, postpone. If that is not possible, do the service either without communion or with communion in one kind. It would be best not to have a repast after the service, but save that celebration of a life until another time. Be sure to talk with the family. The time around a funeral is a time of fear and anxiety, and you will need to exercise your best pastoral skills and make your best pastoral decisions.

What about weddings?
Weddings during Lent are not our normative practice. Should you have a wedding, talk with the couple about keeping the group small and about not having communion, or doing it in one kind only. We recommend that a reception at the church not take place or be scaled back to limit contact of people with food or surfaces. If the reception is elsewhere, the venue will be responsible for these decisions and safeguards.

May we offer outdoor services?
All public worship should be suspended, no matter where it takes place.

May we have some guidance on the size of the gathering that should be cancelled?
There is not consistent data about this. The challenge is that we have no idea who is already infected, so it's a statistical puzzle nobody can solve. Many authorities suggest we should avoid all groups over 20, but that is an educated guess even by experts.

Can we stream an unattended service?
Yes. In fact we encourage streaming services during this time. It may feel odd to say "The Lord be with you" and not hear the usual response, but streaming an unattended service is faithful. In order for there to be a celebration of Holy Eucharist, at least one other person needs to be present. Be sure to exercise all of the safeguards.
Can we celebrate the Eucharist in private homes?
At this point, it appears that the greatest risk of a home communion would be to the shut in person you are visiting, and not to the visitor. Be sure to talk with those you are visiting before you go. That applies to homes, nursing homes and hospitals.

If this question is meant to seek a way around temporarily suspending worship in churches by moving worship to homes, the answer is no. The health risk of gathering in groups right now applies wherever the group is gathered. And worship in a home is still the worship of the Church.

Any suggestions on food pantries?
See the attachment on best practices for food pantries during this pandemic. Because we are attentive to the most vulnerable among us, we pay particular attention to those who are food-insecure. We are not closing our churches, and we are not suspending ongoing ministries. We will, however, adjust those ministries to protect everyone.

What about non-church gatherings like AA or ALANON?
Pastoral sensitivity to the increased strain on recovery group members may indicate continuing to allow these groups to meet, unless later proscribed by public authorities. Please be proactive in educating your liaisons about hygiene and social distancing guidelines, as well as disinfecting spaces.

What about choir rehearsals?
These are best suspended for the time being. Choirs can be creative with parts rehearsals or practicing with recordings in preparation for glorious Easter worship. Let your creative leaders loose to figure out new practices in this time.
My church has a foundation that offers tours to the public. Should we cancel those as well?

Be in touch with your associated foundation board and share information. At a minimum, facilities will need to be disinfected. Ultimately, the parish priest has the authority to determine who may be in the church at what time and for what reason.

Do we count/report a service that is done virtually?
Please record these services in your service books. We understand that there is no reliable way to count those "in attendance," but it will important to document, for history, this adaptation to worship in this extraordinary circumstance. The virtual service you record in your service register does not need to be counted when you determine year-end Average Sunday Attendance.

Can we hold Sunday school or do we have to cancel that too?
Public gatherings should be suspended.

What about small midweek services?
As noted in previous questions, the definition of "small" remains unclear. If small groups gather for worship, all protocols for health and for worship should be followed. Out of an abundance of caution, most congregations will choose to suspend these services and activities as well.

Should we cancel Lenten programs and lunches?
Given that our aim is to slow the spread of the coronavirus and to protect those who are most vulnerable, it makes the best sense to postpone or cancel these activities for the time being.
Can we get a diocesan side contract for zoom meetings and live streaming services?
We are setting up Zoom meetings for diocesan level meetings as requested. We are researching the possibility of a diocesan subscription. However, in the meantime, please note that a zoom subscription is available on a monthly basis, and especially for a smaller congregation is not very expensive. Here’s a link: zoom.us/pricing

Can we still have the church open?
At the present moment, yes. In fact, people may seek the loving presence of the church more than they do in "ordinary" circumstances. Always be attentive to disinfecting surfaces and following hygiene guidelines.

As further questions come to us, and to the extent that they would apply to others, we will send another update.

We encourage pledgers to be faithful to the pledges they have made, whether they worship physically in the church building or not. We urge those who make a plate offering when they are in church to double or triple their offering the next time they worship in the church building. The operating and mission expenses of the church will continue unchanged during this time, so our giving should remain unchanged - or even increased. Resources for online giving for churches that don’t already offer that option are included in this mailing.

God is good. God will be praised. We will be ok. In fact, this disruption in our usual patterns may just make room for God to come and do a new thing in us. May we all remain wide open to the amazing and surprising movement of the Spirit.