

A Message from Bishop Hughes

April 17, 2020

Dear Companions on the Journey of Faith,

This has been a week full of blessings, sorrows, challenges, and opportunity. Every week since the appearance of the virus COVID-19 has been full of the same. But the difference is that this week began with Easter. The holiday is over and has become a rich memory. While we have entered Eastertide, there is no escaping that our current reality involves school closure through May 15 and what looks like another month of “stay-at-home” orders. Worse, each day brings the news that another 300+ people died in our state. While there has been progress made with fewer hospitalizations, our health care professionals and first responders are still being pushed to their maximum. It is a sobering Easter Week.

In this environment we cannot help but ask how are we to be church now? What happens to worship going forward? Will we ever receive communion again? Let me answer those questions in the order I posed them:

How are we to be church now?

We have already begun to be a new kind of church. We are discovering the importance of our connection to God and to each other. These connections were not ever limited to church buildings, except perhaps in our own minds. We have only just begun these discoveries and connections. We will stay alert to the ways in which we grow and expand in the coming weeks. We are being blessed by God’s presence and guidance in this difficult time and we are allowing those blessings to shape who we become as church.

What happens to worship going forward?

We continue to do all we can to keep others safe. This is a basic tenet of our faith: Love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Worship online continues to be an opportunity for us to connect with God and each other while keeping others safe.

Earlier this week, I communicated to the clergy an important change to worship: **a maximum of three people at required social distance, including the clergy, may be involved with the streaming or recording of worship from church buildings.** We do this with the support of the Governor’s Deputy Chief of Staff for Outreach, Deborah Cornavaca. They are aware that some houses of worship use “skeletal” teams of 2 – 3, including the clergy, to stream worship.

I appreciate the support of the Governor’s staff and their understanding of the need for some of our worship to be seen in our churches. Still, even this limited number of participants is risky for many of our priests. A significant number of clergy in our diocese are in high-risk groups due to age and underlying conditions. I have instructed all clergy in high-risk groups (and any who do not feel safe going out) to stream worship from home. While I know that some get great comfort from seeing their church on Sundays, that comfort must not come at the risk of anyone’s life. I am convinced that no member of our churches would allow harm to come to others for any reason including the desire to see one’s church.

This change -- a maximum of three people (including clergy) being allowed in church buildings for streaming or recording of worship -- became effective Monday, April 13 and will remain in place until further notice.

Will we ever receive communion again?

I am certain we will. Just as I am certain we will worship in our churches again. I also know, it will look and feel completely different than it has in the past. We are already talking about potential precautions needed for public worship in various scenarios of relaxed distancing protocols. Until then, we wait, knowing that we experience Christ's presence in a multitude of other ways: in our online gatherings, phone calls, blog and social media posts, requests for help, and the generosity with which we share food for the spirit and the body. We are discovering Christ's presence is as real to us now as it is when we receive Holy Communion. This reaffirms His promise to be with us at all times. (Matthew 28:20)

What can you do right now?

Pay attention to change, make note of who joins you for online worship or study, pray for each other, and talk frequently with God and each other and about your response to all of this. Each of us moves through fear, joy, worry, sorrow, hope, and peace all through the day. Name your responses and offer them to God in prayer. Reflect on how the changes you experience shape your faith. Consider how God is calling you to help another person. We are in this together, which means we all need to keep an eye out for those around us. How can you help within the confines of the stay-at-home order? Discuss it with family or friends and come up with a plan to safely help others.

Finally, prepare yourself and others for end of life conversations.

Many people, including clergy, have been quite ill with COVID-19 in our diocese. As the virus continues, others will get sick and some may die. Because hospitals have barred all visitors **including clergy** at this time, most deaths in hospitals occur without family present. In the event that you receive a call that your hospitalized loved one is dying, I hope "**Prayers to Say Goodbye to a Loved One When Separated**" will be of help (attached to this message and on our website). I encourage you to discuss them with your priest, Bible or book study, prayer group, and/or family. While these prayers are meant for support, they are not a requirement. There is no requirement for 'last rites' by a priest or anyone else in our tradition, but many find prayers at the end of life to be a comfort.

I doubt any of us imagined the journey we would travel together. While it has been complicated and challenging, it has also been a deeply moving experience to walk this path with you. Each day I am surprised again at the way God continues to bless us in this time. Know that you remain in my prayers and I look forward to the day when I see you face-to-face again.

Grace and peace,

The Rt. Rev. Carlye J. Hughes

XI Bishop of Newark