

Highlights of diocesan news in printable format — March 31, 2021

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From Bishop Hughes

How are we to bring God's love into this Holy Week?

This is a transcript from a video.

This is Bishop Hughes in the Diocese of Newark, and I want to talk with you about Holy Week. Holy Week, these days that are dedicated to God – that's what "holy" means, these days that are dedicated to God – where the church spends its time thinking intentionally about Jesus's journey towards the cross, to death and resurrection in preparation for Easter, is some of the most interior and moving and holy time that we spend together in church. And I'm sure many of you have plans to observe this time in just that way this Holy Week, and I hope it is a blessing to you.

And I want to talk with you about one other way about Holy Week being a blessing this year, and that is for us to think about being a blessing to someone else. Now I know my good Episcopalians – as soon as I said that you're already thinking about who do I need to write a check to, where should I run the food drive, what do I need to pick up to donate to some place – and I want to talk with you about something completely different. I want to talk with you about being an example of God's love in this time.

This Holy Week comes at a unique time. It's a book end in this period of pandemic. Last year at Holy Week we had just entered in pandemic, this year at

Holy Week we seem to be moving towards coming out of pandemic. There's so much excitement and enthusiasm about vaccinations and the freedom that that might bring to us. At the same time there is also worry, especially in Northern New Jersey as infection rates and new cases seem to increase at a rate that defies what we were logically expecting at this time. Folks are just tired. We've had enough. We've had enough of dealing with pandemic, we've also had enough of tragedy and we're ready for something different.

And here's where I think we might be able to make a difference in Holy Week. What if we – whoever we are with, wherever we go and however we interact – what if we are dedicated to God at that time. That when we stand before a person – whether it's on the phone or online or in line at the grocery store or to get a vaccine, whether it's at work or at school, whatever it is we're doing – what if we as people dedicated to God intentionally shared God's love? Through our responses, through our interactions, through the words that we say, the things that we do – what if we let people know that they are a blessing? That God has created them to be a gift to the world and we see them as that gift. What if we were able to give God's love to other people all throughout this week. What if we were able to be an example of God's love to other people?

You know a thing that I think is hard for us sometimes to recognize as Christians is most people don't learn Christianity from the Bible, most people don't learn Christianity from church – these

days most people learn everything they know about Christianity from the behavior of another Christian.

They're learning from us. And this week what I want to suggest is that we could teach more by being God's love in all that we say and do. We could teach more by sharing God's love in all that we can say or do. And we can be a part of God's transformation in this world, if in all that we say or do we intentionally ask ourselves, "How am I to bring God's love into this?"

I promise you, if you give yourself the opportunity, God will find the way to help you show God's love wherever you go. And that will be one incredible Holy Week – one that's not just dedicated to God for us but dedicated to God for the world around us.

I pray for blessings on your Holy Week and I pray that your Easter is full of God's blessing and God's great joy.

Bishop's Update on Journey Forward Guidelines

Dear Companions on the Journey,

An update to the Journey Forward Guidelines [appended to this document] was shared with clergy and wardens on Friday, March 26, 2021. This document was created in response to requests from some of our churches to meet despite the current Red/Very High Risk designation of every county in our diocese. While am unable to recommend this course of action due to the daily increase in new cases and infection rate in the month of March, the update includes suggestions for those who decide to move forward with in-person worship at this time.

While I know that all sorts of groups, including some faith traditions, are meeting, it is impossible to know how many exposures or transmissions of COVID-19 have happened at those institutions.

That information is not routinely reported or publicly shared.

The steps outlined for those intending to gather in-person will take time to complete. Your clergy will need time to confer with their family. Additionally, the Wardens and Vestry have been asked to join the clergy in preparatory work that will need time to be completed if a congregation will gather in this current risk category of Red/Very High Risk.

Important to note: Episcopal Visits and Diocesan Meetings remain online in this time of Very High Risk. If I am scheduled for a visit at your parish this program year, it will be at the main worship time and online. Please be prepared for that change if you go ahead with in-person gathering. Additionally, Diocesan Offices will remain closed with the Bishop's Staff continuing to work from home.

We should be able to see more rapid improvement as vaccine becomes widely available within the new two months. Until then, God continues to watch over our going out and coming in, from this time and forevermore.

Grace and peace,
Bishop Hughes

Pursuing Racial Reconciliation

Congregations find Sacred Ground for racial justice work

By Nina Nicholson

Are you looking for a way to create a safe environment to talk about racial justice? Several congregations have found exactly that through the Sacred Ground dialogue series, created by The Episcopal Church.

This past winter, members of at least six congregations in the Diocese of Newark completed

the 10-part series, which includes documentary films and readings focusing on Indigenous, Black, Latino, and Asian/Pacific American histories as they intersect with European American histories.

“The Sacred Ground course has changed how I seek to interact with the world,” said Amy Zebrowski of St. Luke’s, Phillipsburg.

The Rev. Anne Kitch of St. Luke's, Phillipsburg and the Rev. Dr. Debra Brewin-Wilson of St. Mary's, Sparta facilitated the series jointly with members of their congregations. They also invited the congregations in their Regional Ministry Networks, Harriet Tubman (South West) and Constance and Her Companions (North West) and ended up with 14 participants representing five congregations.

The Rev. Margaret Otterburn of Messiah, Chester invited the co-chairs of the diocese’s Namaste Anti-Racism Dialogues, the Rev. Jerry Racioppi and Michele Simon, to facilitate the series with 10 members of her congregation.

“It's a 10-week course,” said Kitch, “but – this is really wise – you don't meet every week, you meet every other week. There's two reasons for that: there's a significant amount of homework between each session, you're watching videos and reading short articles, but also it's so intense that you really need that kind of time to absorb it.”

Kitch and Brewin-Wilson each led one group, or “circle,” one in the daytime, and one in the evening. They divided the 10-part series into five sessions in the fall and five sessions in the winter. All sessions were held on Zoom.

“It worked over Zoom, even though it wasn't designed to work over Zoom,” said Kitch “It was conceived to be in-person, but it transfers well. It makes it accessible to people regardless of where they are, and also there's something about the Zoom format that I think allows people to be intimate but feel a little safer at the same time.”

They found Zoom’s breakout room feature to be helpful, putting participants in “dialogue pairs”

managed by Brewin-Wilson. “I tried to vary it so that people were paired up with different people. Anne and I were the swing people so if someone didn't show up one week because of another commitment then we jumped into that space.”

The Messiah, Chester group met for two hours every two weeks, also on Zoom.

“Sometimes we were in two separate [Zoom] rooms and then other times we were all together, said Otterburn.

All the materials are online; facilitators and participants get a passcode to access them. “Everything's on there so the people who are participating can go there and download all the readings, they can watch all the videos,” Kitch said.

Brewin-Wilson added, “There's training available to the facilitators so that you can feel comfortable in leading.” Kitch noted that facilitators don't even need to have reviewed the materials ahead of time – she and Brewin-Wilson read and viewed the materials at the same time as their participants.

Brewin-Wilson, Kitch and Otterburn all praised the curriculum highly.

“Whoever put it together did a wonderful job in helping us understand ourselves and everything,” said Otterburn. “We had nothing but praise for the program.”

“The curriculum piece of it is just excellent,” said Kitch. “I found a lot of the materials very recent, like documentaries that were made in 2019. Some of it's a little older but it never feels out of date. The articles are very timely. It's been a long time since I’ve facilitated something where I thought the content was so excellent and we didn't have to mess with it at all.”

Brewin-Wilson said, “I certainly had anxieties about, oh my gosh, what if this discussion just goes off the rails, but that never happened, and I think it's because everything you're provided with helps

you to make that safe space, so that you feel okay exploring, even your anxieties.”

“I really wanted a forum in which you could have conversations about what you were reading with other people who are also on the learning curve,” said Kitch. “Sometimes it's uncomfortable because you don't know what's okay to say, and this is set up so that it really makes it a very welcome environment to have those kinds of conversations.”

Participant Chika Okoye of St. James, Hackettstown grew up in Nigeria, “where all the billboards are of Black people and everybody on TV is Black – only foreign films have white people in them. You don't go to a marketplace and you're the only black person – no, everybody's Black, so my perspective would be different,” she said.

“I do not realize how biased people are because it's not where I'm coming from, but I have children that have grown here and they are more sensitive to this, and that was one of the reasons why I decided, you know, maybe I should educate myself more. Because they recognize when they're being followed in a store – I don't.”

She said, “It was helpful for me because I hadn't had the opportunity to see it from the other side. I've always heard the Black perspective, but you know the white perspective is also a little bit different, because many of the participants were unaware of certain things.”

Otterburn says the course is appropriate for anyone with “a willingness to do the work. You're watching an hour-long video before every session and there's quite a lot to read.”

Kathleen O'Brien of St. Mary's Sparta was initially taken aback by the amount of material, but after completing the course, she emailed Brewin-Wilson and Kitch:

I just wanted to share with both of you something that struck me this morning. As I was walking my dog I was reflecting on the Sacred Ground course. When I first started it I thought “This is too much.”

But now that it's over I'm thinking maybe it's not enough. Thank you both.

All three priests are willing and eager to advise other congregations who are considering doing the Sacred Ground series.

St. George's, Maplewood plans to begin the series in April.

“Our congregation has been discerning who God is calling us to be right now in our community, and one of the core themes that keeps being repeated is the desire to seek Christ in the world around us and to cross boundaries beyond our normal areas of comfort – particularly in the spaces of racial, cultural, political, and economic injustices,” said the Rev. Grant Mansfield of St. George's.

“Sacred Ground is an opportunity for us to examine the deep history of racism and white supremacy in our country and Church through the eyes of faith, and wrestle with the uncomfortable truth of how this history has directly formed our individual stories and experiences of life today.

“Sacred Ground is just that, a sacred ground to do this work together.”

Diocesan Announcements

Clergy ministry transitions

Arrivals

- The Rev. Bowie Snodgrass, Rector, Christ Church, Short Hills - March 17
- The Rev. Brandon Daniel King, Priest-in-Charge, Trinity, Bayonne - March 22

Departures

- The Rev. Willie Smith, Rector, Trinity, Cliffside Park – Feb. 28



The Episcopal Diocese of Newark

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God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. *Psalm 46:1*

Journey Forward Update

March 26, 2021

Dear Clergy and Wardens,

In the midst of new and unfolding challenges, God has continuously guided our path, blessed us with a deepening faith and stronger community, and expanded our capacity to care for the hungry, grieving, lonely, and anxious. I trust God to guide us through the next few months as we wait for greater vaccine availability.

Across the past year of pandemic, we have handled COVID-19 risk reduction practices in a variety of ways. Early on, I made several direct decisions to immediately and drastically limit in-person gatherings, when the impact of the virus was greatest.

In the summer of 2020, the Journey Forward Task Force produced guidelines for congregational gatherings, following best practices on limited gatherings, as the number of cases and infection rate decreased. At that point, the decision regarding gathering in-person was directly given back to congregational leadership, lay and clergy.

In late November, it was clear that the risk for COVID-19 was increasing again, as we saw surges following Halloween and Thanksgiving. I directly limited in-person gatherings again at that time, responding to this urgency, and re-gathered the Journey Forward group to consider guidelines that could adapt to changes in COVID-19 data. In mid-December, they produced a revised set of guidelines, keyed to the risk levels on Covid Act Now (<http://covidactnow.org>), which aggregates data in a local, clear and helpful manner. This way we were all using the same sets of numbers and could assess risk by county, rather than as a blanket across the diocese. *With these revised guidelines, decision-making was again returned to congregational leadership, but tied to reported risk levels in the local county.*

When properly following these revised guidelines, when risk is severe or very high (“Very Red/Red”), gatherings should be very limited, primarily allowing only those persons necessary to stream or record worship. (“Red” or very high risk remains the current situation for all counties in our diocese at this writing.) As risk decreases to high (“Orange”), the procedures from the guidelines, similar to those from Summer/Fall 2020, may be reinstated though no congregation is required or expected to do so.

I do not think that churches should meet in-person when risk levels are at these severe or very high levels (“Very Red/Red” on Covid Act Now). The current daily new case numbers in every county in our diocese represent an active outbreak and are not decreasing. During the month of March, they

have increased. This approach, using Covid Act Now metrics and the related revised Journey Forward Guidelines, is still what I and my office recommend. These guidelines are found at <https://dioceseofnewark.org/covid-19/journey-forward>.

However, it is the choice of the local congregation, through the decisions of your clergy and vestry to follow these guidelines. No data shows that it is safe to gather in-person right now, though there are many in our state government, our towns and cities, and in other religious communities that seem to be choosing otherwise. The increasing numbers create concern that a surge could be imminent.

Please look at CDC and public health data from reliable sources for further nuance. Check with your local health department and infectious disease specialists. Make sure you have a clear understanding of the current rise in new cases and infection rates and resulting risks. Please also make sure that you have a clear understanding of CDC and other recommendations for gatherings or participation in gatherings by individuals who have been vaccinated. I am concerned that we may be tempted to overestimate the protection this provides, especially as infection numbers climb and the risk level continues to climb. Continuing to avoid large gatherings is one of the CDC recommendations for those vaccinated.

Clergy will need to decide *first and foremost* about risk, based on the need for their own health and the health of their families. Clergy and Vestry will only then discuss local risk data. If your clergy and Vestry decide to meet anyway, even if still in the “Red” level on Covid Act Now, you should follow the protocols in the Journey Forward Guidelines identified with the “Orange” level of risk. Be ready to inform my office and your congregation when someone tests positive for COVID-19 or gets sick with coronavirus. If that should occur with someone who has been in attendance in person, you should move to automatically suspend in-person gatherings for 14 days in response.

Nonetheless, I would ask that *all* congregations provide Communion at their discretion once a month to their parishioners. This applies both to those congregations that continue to follow the guidelines as written and not meet in-person while risk levels are at this very high level, as well as to those choosing to make an exception and planning to meet in-person. For those not able to attend in-person because of health concerns, please ensure that a no-contact delivery of communion takes place, following Eucharistic Visitor or Communion under Special Circumstances practices in our Book of Common Prayer, Book of Occasional Services, and Canons along with the guidance that our Diocese has prepared for this practice. Please note that drive-through communion and mailing communion are not permitted.

Guidance for those congregations that continue to observe guideline precautions during Red/Very High Risk:

- Discuss with Vestry and communicate plans to continue online gatherings.
- Continue to maintain practice of 10 or fewer present, all of whom need to be present to accomplish live-streamed or recorded worship.
- When Eucharist is celebrated, only the celebrant should be receiving Communion.
- Monthly Communion Under Special Circumstances for those who cannot gather in-person: Communion would be distributed after the service at an outdoor station or by no-contact, distanced home delivery. Follow guidelines for Diocesan Communion for distribution. In this case, the celebrant alone would receive Communion during the service, but then be able to distribute it afterwards, outdoors or through home delivery.

Guidance for those congregations who want to consider making an exception to gather during Red/Very High Risk:

- Risk assessment exception – if a priest determines with their household that they are willing to lead in-person worship, even in active outbreak, they may follow these steps prior to an in-person gathering:
 - Consult and read through relevant, credible local data regarding current levels of potential COVID exposure in their community.
 - Discuss with regional colleagues for feedback and to ensure that nearby clergy are aware of your decision.
 - Discuss with Vestry and other key leaders in the congregation.
 - If agreement is reached with clergy and lay leadership to offer in-person gathering, even if contraindicated by risk levels on <http://covidactnow.org>, they will give notice to the Canon to the Ordinary using the webform (<https://dioceseofnewark.org/form/notice-in-person-worship>) by 12 noon on the Thursday prior to the Sunday intended for in-person worship.
 - Worship under this exception will follow the “Orange Level” Journey Forward guidelines for in-person gatherings (These guidelines are found at <https://dioceseofnewark.org/covid-19/journey-forward>) as well as all New Jersey state limitations with the following adjustments:
 - To reduce possible risk, outdoor gatherings for in-person worship should be considered as the primary option wherever possible.
 - The maximum limit for those who could gather outdoors is 75 persons.
 - The maximum limit for those who could gather indoors, if outdoors is not possible, is 50 persons.
 - If worship includes Holy Communion, those gathered may receive in addition to the Celebrant (still only using bread, in one kind), as per the Orange Level Journey Forward guidelines.
 - Prepare congregation and the space for distancing, masking, and no physical contact.
 - Remember that services will need to be shorter (45 minutes or less is the goal) and make provision for streaming or taping for those unable to attend in-person.
 - No coffee hour gathering following worship.
 - Plans should include a clear communication plan if an attendee tests positive, to ensure that all in attendance are notified. Any church with a positive case in attendance at an in-person gathering should suspend in-person gatherings for at least two weeks and will report this news to the Canon to the Ordinary immediately.
 - Monthly Communion Under Special Circumstances for those who cannot gather in-person: Communion would be distributed after the service at an outdoor station or by no-contact, distanced home delivery. Follow guidelines for Diocesan Communion under Special Circumstances for distribution.

Important to note: Episcopal Visits and Diocesan Meetings remain online in this time of Very High Risk. If I am scheduled for a visit at your parish this program year, it will be at the main worship time and online. Please be prepared for that change if you go ahead with in-person gathering. Additionally, Diocesan Offices will remain closed with the Bishop’s Staff continuing to work from home.

I know these are complicated decisions and will require prayerful consideration. Take the time to discuss, plan, and implement change. Pray all along the way for God’s guidance. Let us know if you need assistance and know that you continue to have my prayers.

Grace and peace,

+ Carlye J. Hughes

The Rt. Rev. Carlye J. Hughes
XI Bishop of Newark