

# The Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh



March 12, 2020

My dear friends in Christ,

One week has passed since I first shared with you my thoughts and guidelines concerning our response to the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus, so today I offer an update. Some of what I will address here is intended to strengthen my original recommendations, while others are new – particularly giving local clergy, in consultation with their lay leaders, discretion to limit certain practices and gatherings within their parishes. These updated guidelines are based on our on-going monitoring of the directives of local, state, and national public health officials, as well as consultation with my fellow bishops in Pennsylvania, and with clergy and lay leadership throughout the diocese.

## **Gathering for Public Worship**

There may come a time when public meetings of any significant size are banned by local health authorities. In the meantime, I believe it is of great importance that we continue to gather in worship on Sundays, to offer the “sacrifice of praise” on behalf of the Church and the world. However, I emphasize that local clergy, in consultation with their lay leadership, have discretion to suspend public worship in their respective parishes should they deem that necessary. Should any priest make that decision, I ask that they inform me directly in advance.

Under such conditions, I ask that the Holy Eucharist or the Office of Morning Prayer still be conducted at the parish with two or three people present, so that the prayer of the Church gathered can continue in our neighborhoods. Furthermore, I ask parishes under those circumstances to take advantage of available technology either to stream such services or to have their congregations join the online worship of other parishes. At this time at least five churches in our diocese are developing plans to offer online services. We will be providing a continually updated list with links on the diocesan website, [www.episcopalpgh.org](http://www.episcopalpgh.org).

## **The Common Cup**

The common cup will continue to be offered throughout the diocese for those who choose to drink from it. I emphasize once again the importance of avoiding intinction. I understand that some of our members may find my restriction on this practice difficult to accept. I know that habits we consider sacred are only yielded with difficulty. However, as bishop, I must insist that this practice be discontinued for the foreseeable future. The receiving of the Bread and the Wine itself is a communal act, and as such it is not about any one of us. It is about all of us. Our personal preferences have no place in determining the practice of the Church. No matter how careful you think you are in not meeting the wine with your fingers, or touching the cup with your hand, you cannot be sure that you have succeeded; moreover, you may set a stumbling block before the person who receives the cup after you, who must now wonder whether it is safe rather than offering thanks to God for the gift of Christ’s death.

In any parish where the sharing of the common cup becomes a matter of dispute rather than of unity, I grant the clergy full discretion to limit or suspend the administration of the consecrated wine, knowing that Communion in one kind is a full share in the Presence of Christ. Should anyone have any further questions or concerns, I invite them to contact me directly by email or phone.

### **Other Activities at Church**

Please keep a distance of at least three feet between you and the person nearest you, while in worship. I know this may seem arbitrary, but “social distancing” has been proven to be a valuable practice in limiting transmission. When passing the Peace, I urge you to limit physical contact by staying in your pews and greeting only those near you. Please do not embrace or shake hands. As best you’re able, use eye contact, nods, waves, and the like, to share the Peace with others, particularly those at a further distance.

Each parish should examine the practice of how collection plates are passed so that these may be handled by as few people as possible and in a sanitary manner.

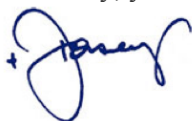
I ask you to suspend or modify coffee hours for the time being, and similarly use your best judgment concerning other public gatherings, such as fish fries during Lent. If you are hosting outside groups, particularly 12-step programs, I ask that our clergy and lay leaders work with the leadership of those groups to ensure that reasonable care is taken to preserve a healthy environment in those meetings.

### **Staying Home and Pastoral Care**

While it is desirable that all who are able continue to gather for worship, I do urge those who are more susceptible to illness – older members of our congregation and those with compromised immune systems – to stay home for the immediate future. You will be with us in spirit, and as best able, we will bring church to you. I urge the clergy to empower and train those who can serve as lay Eucharistic visitors in both spiritual and practical matters associated with such visits. All of us should remain mindful and caring of those who may be most affected by illness.

This is not the first time the Church has been challenged by the specter of widespread illness. Through the centuries we have endured plagues and pandemics of various kinds. We are not afraid. On the contrary, as Saint Paul writes, “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (*Romans 5:3-4*). In the midst of such times, our calling is to keep this beacon of hope burning brightly in the world, always to minister the love of Christ to those in greatest need. So let us be stewards of our own health for the sake of the health of those around us. Let us continue to care for and sustain those who may be alone or forgotten in our communities. And let us act without fear, knowing that the Lord is our strength and our salvation, whose steadfast love endures forever (*Psalms 118*).

Faithfully, your bishop,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Dorsey', with a small cross symbol to the left.

(The Right Reverend) Dorsey W.M. McConnell, D.D.  
VIII Bishop of Pittsburgh

UPDATED March 12, 2020 (new material in *italics*)

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## Guide to best practices during the COVID-19 outbreak

**Number One: Take Care of Yourself and Your Family.** We are commanded to “honor God in our bodies,” so we should do all we can to promote health, for ourselves and our loved ones. Practice the basics of good hygiene:

- ❖ Cover coughs or sneezes with the forearm or elbow (*not* your hands).
- ❖ Wash hands frequently: warm water, soap, 20 seconds minimum.
- ❖ Use hand cleanser frequently, especially after hand contact with others.
- ❖ If you or others in your household are sick, don't be brave. Stay home.

**Number Two: If You Are Healthy, Come to Church!** As The Body of Christ, we are called to community. *For now, public worship will continue in the Diocese of Pittsburgh. Local clergy, in consultation with their wardens and vestry, may suspend public worship if deemed advisable.*

- ❖ *If suspended, a Eucharist or Morning Prayer with two or three people present should still take place.*
- ❖ *Parishes should promote the use of technology for those unable to attend.*
- ❖ *Older people and those susceptible to illness should consider staying home.*

### **Number Three: While At Church...**

At The Peace: *Stay in your pews* and offer non-physical greetings to only those nearby.

At Communion: The common cup shall remain in use *for those who drink from it.*

- ❖ *Intinction (dipping) is a very bad practice and should be avoided at all costs. Clergy may suspend the distribution of the cup if it causes disharmony.*
- ❖ When the cup is shared, clergy and lay Eucharistic ministers should use hand sanitizer, and follow proper techniques (wipe and turn) in administering the cup.
- ❖ Anyone uneasy about receiving from the common cup should take only the Communion bread – even in one form, it is still fully the Presence of our Lord.

Other Activities: *Each parish should re-examine practices and make modifications to:*

- ❖ *Taking up the collection, to limit the number of people handling plates.*
- ❖ *How coffee hours and social events are conducted, suspending if necessary.*

### **Number Four: Care for the Sick and for Those Who Care for Them.**

As the Church has always done, we must continue to do, without fear (Romans 8:15):

- ❖ Pay attention to those who may be at-risk.
- ❖ Reach out and offer appropriate support to health professionals and their families.
- ❖ Beyond the walls of our churches, seek out those who might be vulnerable. Find partners in helping them stay healthy and ministering to them should they fall ill.
- ❖ We are to love those whom Jesus loves, which is absolutely everyone.