

The Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh



April 24, 2020

Dear friends in Christ,

As I write this, it has been one month since Governor Tom Wolf issued a stay-at-home order for Allegheny County. All other counties were included by April 1. In the governor's announcement this week, and through local data assembled from a variety of sources, we are beginning to see signs of improvement in regard to the coronavirus pandemic in our communities.

Eventually it will be time for a gradual re-opening of our churches. I stress that we do not know, at the moment, when or precisely how, such re-openings will take place. Various state and federal authorities are beginning to issue multi-phase guidelines. Across our Church, Episcopal dioceses are formulating their own multi-step plans and are sharing them in a collegial spirit. While none of these totally conforms to the others, a general scenario is emerging for how we might proceed: After a substantial and prolonged reduction in COVID-19 cases locally, small groups may be allowed to assemble for worship and Eucharist, with safeguards in place against transmission of the virus. This would be followed, barring any resurgence of infections, by a widening of the permitted numbers over the course of several months.

There are many questions that will need to be addressed as we prepare for the resumption of in-person worship. A key piece of this period will be the pastoral care — including Eucharistic visitation — for those who would continue to be confined to their homes. Any vulnerable person will be expected to remain sheltered well into the final phase of the recovery. Obviously we will need to be creative and determined as we reach out to our neighbors. The effort could involve younger volunteers from one parish helping older members of another.

There are other concerns that affect the scale and timing of openings, and many questions around best protocols for the use of our facilities beyond Sunday worship. I have asked the Committee on Emergency Preparedness and Response under the guidance of Tim Austin to address a range of such questions, and they will begin to do so with me at their meeting this coming Monday afternoon.

As difficult as this time is, and continues to be, we have also received great gifts. More people are turning to the study of the Scriptures. More are experiencing the richness of the daily offices in The Book of Common Prayer. Lay leadership is broadening and deepening. Attendance is soaring at virtual worship, both on Sundays and mid-week. While we may all be feeling a little over-Zoomed by now, there is no doubt that we are using this time to build closer ties to one another. All of this represents a store of new learning and new practices that we must not lose as things slowly move toward some sense of normalcy. In order to help us all continue in these gifts and grow them for the future, I have asked Jon Delano to incorporate this goal into the next phase of our CREED initiative, to look at what we have all done and how we might build a treasury of best practices for the days to come.

I thank all of you, the clergy and laity of this diocese, for your patience and care in scrupulously observing the guidelines I have laid out in my letters of March 18 and 27, and which remain in effect until further notice. I ask us all still to persist in those very virtues — patience and care — as we continue to live under and learn from these restrictions as they are now and will evolve over the foreseeable future.

Many centuries ago, a Christian martyr in exile wrote to his church family and friends with a gift he had received during the hard period of his isolation, a gift we now call the Revelation. John, on Patmos, described himself as their *brother and partner in the tribulation and the Kingdom and the patient endurance (Revelation 1:9)*. They shared tribulation in different ways — he in exile, they under persecution — and they were called to endure patiently, trusting in the Kingdom of God, in Christ's sovereign grace and power, to hold them together and bring them through their trials. Saint Paul even refers to this experience as *patient endurance with joy (Colossians 1:11)*, a time of determined waiting, out of which God brings many gifts and much fruit of the Holy Spirit. We are now in such a time; indeed, we are probably only at the beginning, with months ahead of us and the end unclear. So let's keep walking together, in patience and in confidence that the Lord who raises the dead will bring us together into new life.

Faithfully your bishop,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dorsey", with a small cross symbol to the left of the first letter.

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