



A Letter from Bishop McConnell: Life Together During the Pandemic

March 27, 2020

Beloved in Christ,

Though we are more than halfway through the season of Lent, it looks as though we are only at the beginning of a time of prayer, fasting, and self-denial. Precautions urged by our civil authorities in light of the COVID-19 pandemic – staying home, limiting travel, keeping personal distance, washing hands frequently – will almost certainly continue beyond Easter. While we do not yet know exactly how this will affect our common Sunday worship, it is likely that restricted Eucharistic celebrations in parishes, supplemented by online streaming, will be the “new normal” for some time to come.



Physical separation from one another in the community of faith is hard to bear. As the living Body of Christ, we lean on one another. We are to each other the constant reminder of God’s nearness to us. The consolation of our friends in Christ has helped us through losses of all kinds, expressed in the way we humans do – a hug, a kiss, an arm about the shoulder, hand in hand. To be deprived of this tenderness is a great sacrifice.

Yet, perhaps in another way – in God’s way – this is all a paradoxical gift. The more we are apart, the closer we become. As God empties us, Christ fills us with Himself.

On Wednesday, I convened my first weekly Zoom call with the clergy of the diocese. There were 40 of us on the line. We traded news, ideas, best practices, and helpful links. We shared our struggles, joys, and requests for prayer. We prayed together. As I listened, I was once again reminded of the gift we are to one another – priests, deacons, and laity. I was encouraged that so many lay leaders are claiming their call as spiritual elders of the flock of God. So many of you are using this time to deepen your prayer life through exploration of the Book of Common Prayer, especially the Daily Offices of Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, and Compline. Virtual Bible studies are multiplying; my own Wednesday study group on 1 Peter now meets weekly, rather than twice a month. Phone-trees are everywhere. People are increasingly aware of the needs of the most vulnerable and are seeking ways to meet those needs while maintaining their own health and safety.

These are all good signs in the midst of a world full of pain and fear, a world we are called to walk in, to pray for, to love. So how can we best walk this road together?

First, as confinement to our homes extends over what may be weeks, it is likely we will experience a substantial increase in personal crises of various kinds, perhaps in our own families and certainly in some around us: people will be hit with sudden financial needs and not know where to turn; they may be increasingly taxed by the burden of caring for children or elders at home. We may see increases in

depression and other mood disorders, domestic violence, and addiction. It is of utmost importance that we become familiar with and utilize existing resources to help us meet these challenges, that we create new resources where there is a need, and that we share that information with one another.

Second, your diocesan staff has nearly completed its initial survey of parish needs. Most of our congregations are reporting stable giving and strong spiritual health. However, it may be some time before we have a complete picture of current diocesan needs, and how those might affect us all in the months to come. We know conditions on the ground can change suddenly, and we will continue to stay in close touch with lay and ordained leadership as this time continues. As always, should anyone have specific concerns or needs, please do not hesitate to [contact us directly](#).

Third, I know there is ongoing concern regarding our common worship in the coming weeks. Until further notice, I ask that you continue to abide by the guidelines for Sunday liturgies as stated in [my letter of March 18](#). I know this restraint is difficult and will continue to be. I also know there is a desire to find alternatives, such as gathering in larger numbers that somehow will not seem like gathering – as in “drive-by” distribution of Holy Communion, or even keeping the reserved Sacrament in our homes. Next week I will issue a teaching document on the Holy Eucharist that will address these and other arrangements I have heard suggested. I hope that will make clear why I am asking you to refrain from such practices, as well intentioned as I know they are.

Finally, while our celebration of Easter will not be in the mode we are used to, we will still be able to celebrate with joy the mysteries of Holy Week. To that end, I commend the following menu of liturgies for the Three Great Days – Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil. They do not depend on the physical presence of the Eucharist or the leadership of clergy. They are rich, deeply prayerful, adaptable to the intimate settings of our homes, and easily enhanced by virtual connection to others. These liturgies have been compiled by our friends at Virginia Theological Seminary, and you can access them at www.episcopalpg.org/vts.

As I suggested at the beginning of my letter, this is a time of hunger and longing, loneliness and hope, fasting and prayer. In it, and through it, God will grant us deeper knowledge of our Lord’s love for us, and will grow us more and more into the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13). In the meantime, let us hold onto one another, encourage one another, and claim our share in the confidence of the Psalmist (73:25-26):

Whom have I in heaven but you?

And having you, I desire nothing upon earth.

Though my flesh and my heart should waste away,

God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Faithfully your bishop,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dorsey McConnell", with a small cross symbol at the beginning.

(The Rt. Rev.) Dorsey McConnell, D.D.
VIII Bishop of Pittsburgh

