



The
EPISCOPAL CHURCH *in*
CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA

14 November 2020

Dear Members of the Episcopal Diocese of Central Pennsylvania,

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

Since March of this year, we have had to “live and move and have our being” in ways that have tested our patience, stretched us creatively, forced us into isolation, and required us to carefully guard our health while caring for and loving our neighbors, all the while. In this space of uncertainty and anxiety, we have learned new ways to follow Jesus boldly and faithfully, and we have remained connected as the Body of Christ. I am very proud of our diocese and the way that we have responded in this time.

The Coronavirus pandemic continues to rage in our country and across the world. Infection rates are as high- and higher- now than ever and they show no sign of decreasing. Pennsylvania’s rates of infection are now four times what they were from our summer’s lowest ebb, and two of the counties in our diocese are among the top ten counties for virus transmission in the Commonwealth. While there is hope of an effective and widely distributed vaccine within months, we are not there yet. It has become increasingly clear that we must respond to this surge in infections with, again, a shift in our practices as worshipping communities.

The Task Force on Operations met twice this past week and the decision was to recommend suspending all in person worship and parish meetings effective Saturday Nov. 21 through the rest of the calendar year.

After consultation with health experts, other Pennsylvania bishops (two of whom are also initiating closings in NW PA and Bethlehem), and a meeting with the Standing Committee who endorses this plan, I believe that the best course of action to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus and to keep our communities safe requires the suspension of in-person, indoor worship. I know that as we approach Advent and Christmas, two of our most beloved seasons of the Christian year, that this news will be painful. Please know that it is with your safety and the health of the citizens of our Commonwealth in mind that the leadership of our diocese arrived at this decision and that we grieve the loss of our traditions in this holy time of year along with you.

All indoor worship in parishes will be suspended beginning Nov.21 and remain in effect until the end of the calendar year.

Outdoor worship, as weather allows, with appropriate social distancing and mask wearing will still be permissible. Continued use of livestreaming, zoom and social media platforms continues to be

encouraged for worship, fellowship and committee meetings. Please know that Canon Alexis Guszick is happy to consult with congregations to assist in developing an online platform.

The small number of ministers required for livestreaming will be permitted to gather in church chancels for the purposes of recording or live streaming, and I will be meeting with clergy to discuss theologically sound methods of making Christmas communion available in a no-touch delivery system for reception in your own homes in order to celebrate the Feast of the Incarnation. Additionally, for congregations without livestreaming capacity, a list of services available for watching through the internet, including our cathedral services on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, will be released during Advent.

Parish programs that serve at-risk populations that cannot meet virtually to accomplish their mission are permitted to continue: feeding programs for the hungry and homeless, tutoring programs for students learning virtually, AA and other 12 step meetings may continue with the appropriate safeguards (masks, safe distancing, etc.) in place.

The Task Force and I will keep a careful watch on the impact of the virus in our diocese and we will meet regularly with the Standing Committee to discuss the best time to regather in church.

I am grateful for your faithfulness and keep you close in my prayers. May the God of compassion surround those who suffer, the God of courage give us the strength to endure, and the God of hope carry us to see a brighter day.

Praying for health and safety, I am yours in the Way of Love,

+Audrey