



APRIL 29, 2020

The Episcopal Diocese of Utah

The Rt. Rev. Scott B. Hayashi

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We are Easter People in a chaotic time. Instead of being driven and tossed by the latest bit of news, we hold fast to God who is above all, even as God holds fast to us. With Christ, and in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, we are united, and therefore can transcend the present time that is marked by fear, division and uncertainty.

Being Christian has often meant being at odds with the prevailing culture. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian, pastor and anti-Nazi protestor who wrote *The Cost of Discipleship* was one of the most powerful examples of this. What he faced is far more extreme than us.

Presently, there is a cultural push to reopen our lives. This is an understandable desire to return to the way we were a short two months ago. I confess to you that I want that very much. While this is true, I cannot let that desire override expert medical and scientific research and guidance. I believe that God is love and life, and that my decisions for our life as Episcopalians in our diocese should be grounded in that love and life. Even if it runs counter to what is developing in our state and nation.

The clergy have responded magnificently to this chaotic and uncertain time. There is more church going on now than there was two months ago. It is not happening at our buildings with public attendance for worship, or for meetings or studies. Rather it has come to your living rooms, kitchens, bedrooms, patios and anywhere you are via streaming and recorded services. The prayers, readings, sermons and teaching have reached far beyond those who would normally attend at our congregations. I see this as one of the most profound manifestations of incarnational ministry. Jesus came to us and met us where we are. God did not say you must come here or there to meet me. Jesus came to us. Our clergy, by providing the services, reflections, story times, Bible Studies and more through the internet have literally come to you with the good news wherever and whenever you are. As I wrote to you in my last pastoral letter, **God is indeed doing a new thing and it is easy to discern it in the work and witness of all of you, the people and clergy of The Episcopal Diocese of Utah.**

As marvelous as this is, it does not fulfill our desire and need to be physically together. I had hoped that by May, the COVID-19 virus would have reached its peak and started declining across our diocese. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Nor can we be certain that we can avoid another spike in cases by relaxing our restrictions. Therefore, the present pattern of providing worship virtually shall continue at least until the end of May.

It has become clear that it is impossible to forecast a date to safely resume full in-person worship. The virus does not answer to us. We answer to the virus. How quickly or slowly the virus will recede largely depends on how we behave. Reopening while the virus is still spreading only gives it the opportunity to continue its upward trajectory. The Diocese of Utah will contribute to mitigating the virus, not spreading it. As your bishop, I find it is important we have a clear road map for the way forward, even without being able to predict a definite date to safely resume in-person worship and outreach. This pastoral letter is that road map.

One of things we have learned is that each state is different in regard to the spread of the virus. Further, within each diocese, there are differences from one locale to another. What this indicates is that the best course for us to follow is to have a process that takes into consideration these differences. That means that one part of our diocese could transition to in-person gatherings sooner than another part. When the time comes when we will all be able to safely gather then we will have a joyous all diocese celebration. I look forward to that.

I look at our meeting the challenge of the pandemic in four seasons:

Season One: Stay at Home - Mitigation of the Spread of Covid-19

Season Two: Continued Mitigation

Season Three: Lifting of Physical Distancing with Protection

Season Four: Application of Learnings and Future Preparations

Season One: Stay at Home - Mitigation of the Spread of Covid-19 We have been in this season since the middle of March. As I stated above, we shall continue in our present pattern of worship and behavior to help mitigate the spread of the virus at least until the end of May. We do this not only for ourselves, we do it for the sake of our entire community, state, nation and world.

Season Two: Continued Mitigation When there is a sustained reduction in cases for at least 14 days, then we will transition to in-person worship, work and outreach. (This may happen in one location of our diocese before or later than another.) This includes:

- Church offices may open in spaces large enough for physical distancing.
- Smaller churches may worship in spaces large enough for physical distancing.
- Scale-able worship 10, 50, 100 – in spaces large enough for physical distancing. Face masks will be worn, households will sit together with physical distancing of six feet from other households or individuals. Disinfecting of hard surfaces shall be done following each meeting or worship service. Common cup shall not be used for Holy Communion.
- Signs will be prominently displayed that people who are manifesting COVID-19 symptoms should not enter the building.
- Continued virtual Morning Prayer and other offerings.
- In-person pastoral visits resume to low risk parishioners.
- Practice health safety protocols - wearing masks, physical distancing.
- Outside groups that use the building will be required to follow physical distancing and health and safety protocols.
- Coordinate all plans with the Bishop's Office
- Outbreaks in the virus will mean a return to Season One practices until there is a reduction in cases for at least 14 days.

Season Two may last for several months or longer. The John Hopkins Center for Health Security advises that we "[r]ecognize that the desire to get back to normal as quickly as possible is a common reaction in the catastrophic context, and it is an impulse worth restraining." *

We cannot ignore that superspreading events have been linked to religious services and choir practices*. We still do not know much about COVID-19, one of the most consistent findings is that the disease carries a much higher fatality rate among older adults. According to data from the CDC, 91 percent of all deaths related to the virus have occurred among people 55 and older.

Season Three: Lifting of Physical Distancing with Protection The health markers we will look for moving into Season Three include:

- Negative community spread of the virus
- Mass vaccination
- Mass testing for virus and immunity
- Lifting physical distancing

Congregations will transition to:

- Church offices opened
- Worship in churches
- Continued virtual option provided
- Continued virtual meeting option provided
- Holy Eucharist may resume under new guidelines
- Return to all outreach ministries
- Coordinate all plans with the Bishop's Office
- Outbreaks in virus will mean returning to previous protocols for 14 days.

Season Four: Application of Learnings and Future Preparations

All of us have been learning lessons during this time that will strengthen us to meet our future better prepared for ministry, mission and the possibility of another pandemic. We are not seeking a return to pre-pandemic Diocese of Utah. With the spiritual, emotional, functional and practical lessons that we are learning, we can build a new church together. We are learning how to be better followers of Jesus and The Way of Love.

We are making progress upon this already by developing:

- Platforms for livestreaming and uploading our worship services.
- Platforms for gathering online.
- Meetings and programs that are accessible online in real-time.
- Be more quickly responsive and adapting to a changing world.
- Better sense of interdependence and interconnectedness.

A Call to Action

We have seen that this pandemic is taking a heavier toll on communities of color, the poor and the homeless. This is not unexpected. In all difficult situations, even mildly challenging ones, these friends, neighbors and church goers are the ones who suffer the most. I urge us to help raise them up because they are equally God's children as anyone else and because by leaving them to be exposed and getting the COVID-19 virus or any future pandemic health threat, the threat to all us is increased.

We have also seen that many of the workers who receive the lowest wages and least benefits like food processor, meat packers, delivery workers, and others are now "essential". They are literally risking their lives for the benefit of the larger community. They deserve the thanks and respect of the larger community and increased wages and benefits that befits their essential status.

We have also seen the benefit of not having so many people driving on our roads. The air is cleaner around the world. People are able to breathe more easily; incidence of respiratory distress is much lower. If there was ever any doubt that it is human behavior that causes the degradation of our environment, that doubt is now erased. I urge us to continue our efforts to address climate change personally and advocate for reducing carbon emissions and the use of fossil fuels.

We must become advocates for a U.S. health system that is prepared to face new pandemics. This means pressing our elected leaders to fund research and development initiatives, expand public-health and health care infrastructure and workforce, and to implement clear governance structures to execute strong preparedness plans.

We will continue to travel through this time and beyond. The road ahead is much longer than we first hoped it would be. However, I cannot think of better traveling companions than you to be together with as we journey into the future.

Faithfully,

+Scott B. Hayashi

Bishop of The Episcopal Diocese of Utah

*Reopening During COVID-19: Guidance for Governors: https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/our-work/pubs_archive/pubs-pdfs/2020/200417-reopening-guidance-governors.pdf