

A Word of Encouragement and Diocesan Guidelines for Parishes During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Acknowledging the importance of people being able to once again worship together in their faith communities, both the federal and state governments have (with certain restrictions) lifted the ban on public worship services. As a result, after consulting with the clergy and many of the lay leaders of the Diocese, as well as a great deal of thought, prayer and research, I have authorized the reopening of church buildings throughout the Diocese of Albany provided certain diocesan guidelines are followed during the Coronavirus Pandemic.

Before outlining the diocesan guidelines, I would like to take just a moment to talk about potential pastoral concerns associated with reopening our Church buildings. First, given the current NY State restriction limiting group gatherings inside church buildings to 10 persons or less (regardless of the size of the building), it is important for parishes to be pastorally sensitive as they devise a plan for public services constricted by the 10 person limit. With the possible exception of our smallest parishes, not everyone will be able to worship together at one time, so multiple services may be needed on Sunday, or spread throughout the week. The challenge will be coming up with an equitable system that allows those who want to attend Church to do so.

Parishes may want to investigate the website (setmore.com) to assist them with scheduling people for their church services. Hopefully the 10 person limit for indoor services will be lifted soon. Until then, however, especially during the warmer months, parishes may want to consider doing an outdoor service, which requires social distancing, but is not constrained by the 10 person rule, thus allowing for more people.

A second pastoral concern (apart from the 10 person limit) has to do with the fact that not everyone is in the same place, or has the same understanding of how best to move forward with public worship services during the Coronavirus Pandemic. I know many of us are anxious to get back to church as quickly as possible, while others of us are not yet ready to physically join in public worship. Please know that whichever group you find yourself in is fine.

No one should feel pressured to return to Church before they are ready, nor should those who want to return right away be seen as uncaring or unconcerned about spreading the Coronavirus. There are safe ways for us to come back to church if we work together. We each have different physical, mental and spiritual needs, all of which are important and need to be met as best we can, given the environment we find ourselves in and the various governmental restrictions we are faced with. May God give each of us the patience and grace we need to show Christian love and charity to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, regardless of one's views concerning when and how to reopen our churches. We cannot afford to allow the coronavirus to divide us.

Similarly, not all parishes are in the same place regarding when and how they (as a parish) should reopen. The fact that a parish may reopen its doors for public worship, does not mean

that it must reopen at this time. There may be parishes in the Diocese whose clergy and lay leaders decide not to reopen their buildings right away given the ongoing potential threat from the Coronavirus and the governmental regulations and diocesan guidelines. They may choose to wait until things calm down a bit more and some of the current restrictions are lifted. The clergy, wardens and vestry in each parish will need to work together in deciding whether this is the time to reopen, or whether to wait. Please inform the Bishop's office of whatever decision is made.

For those parishes that are ready to begin preparing to reopen, a set of diocesan guidelines has been established to help ensure that we provide as safe an environment as reasonably possible for our parishioners and visitors to come together to worship and serve God. While the basic guidelines set forth by the Diocese must be followed by all parishes, individual parishes may choose to add additional parish guidelines to meet their unique circumstances. With that said, no matter how hard we try, there is no way to guarantee 100% that someone might not be exposed to the coronavirus while at church. It is important that we trust God and do our best to provide both a safe environment as well as a meaningful ministry and worship experience for those entrusted to our care.

One of our greatest defenses against the coronavirus is to understand how it spreads. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the coronavirus' primary mode of transmission is believed to be through the aerosolization of respiratory droplets spread from an infected person to others in close contact around them, by sneezing, coughing, singing, or talking at close range. It is for that reason that the government recommends and in certain situations mandates that masks be worn when in public. The purpose of the mask is not so much to filter the air we are breathing, but rather to keep infected people from spewing droplets into the air around them.

While there are a few exceptions such as when someone sneezes or coughs, in most cases aerosolized droplets will not travel more than a few feet before dropping to the ground. Unfortunately in a heavily congested area, that is more than enough space for an infected person to contaminate those around them. That is why social distancing is so important during this pandemic. The CDC recommends keeping a distance of at least six feet from others outside one's home and immediate family.

According to the CDC website, while aerosolized droplets are the primary source of transmission, people can become infected through other means such as "touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes. As a precaution, the CDC recommends regularly cleaning and sanitizing common areas frequented by others as well as practicing good hygiene by thoroughly washing one's hands or using hand sanitizers. Scientific studies have shown that in an ideal situation, COVID-19 can survive on metal or other hard surfaces for up to 72 hours, and for up to 24 hours on cardboard or other porous surfaces.

The diocesan guidelines for the reopening of churches (outlined below), are based primarily on recommendations from the CDC as well as government mandated regulations. They outline the basics of what is needed during this pandemic to help keep our parishioners and visitors safe

while worshipping and serving God in our parishes. Each parish has the responsibility of implementing them in the way that best meets the needs and circumstances of the parish. This is not the sole responsibility of the clergy, but rather the whole parish working together.

It is my hope and prayer that in the not too distant future, the potential threat from the coronavirus will be significantly reduced and we can then ease up, if not totally eliminate many of the following guidelines. For the time being, however, it is important that we follow them, not so much out of a sense of obligation, but rather as an act of love for one another. As Jesus so perfectly demonstrated on the cross, one's love for others, often requires sacrifices on our part.

The personal sacrifices or inconveniences we endure during the Coronavirus Pandemic, may very well be the thing that not only protects ourselves, but even more importantly our loved ones from contracting COVID-19. As stated by the CDC, "The best way to prevent illness is to avoid being exposed to this virus." The following diocesan guidelines will help us in that quest. Everyone's cooperation in fighting the coronavirus as we come back together in our home parishes is greatly appreciated and needed. By the grace and mercy of God, and everyone's hard work, we will get through this.

Guidelines to be Followed by All Churches in the Diocese of Albany During the Coronavirus Pandemic

- 1) Attitude is important. COVID-19 needs to be taken seriously, but we don't need to live in fear. To the degree possible, we need to be proactive, rather than reactive to the coronavirus. Plan ahead.
- 2) At all times when gathering for worship, or carrying out ministry within the Church during the pandemic, keep in mind how the coronavirus spreads and take appropriate precautions to guard against becoming infected or possibly infecting others.
- 3) Clear, respectful signs informing people of the expectation and requirement of wearing masks, social distancing, and the use of hand sanitizer (all outlined below), as well as other necessary instructions, need to be posted near all entrance doors of the Church and other prominent locations.
- 4) If people (to include the clergy) are not feeling well, running a fever, coughing, etc., or have been in contact with someone known to have the coronavirus (even if not showing symptoms), they should not attend Church, until they are well, or have completed self-quarantine. This is for their sake and everyone else's.
- 5) The following sign or something similar will be posted by each entrance door to the Church or worship area:

ATTENTION:

Dear Friends, If you answer YES to any of the following, we ask that you NOT Attend Church today:

- **Have a temperature of 100.4 or higher**
- **Lost your sense of taste or smell**
- **You or someone in your household has tested positive for COVID-19**
- **Have come in contact with someone who tested positive for COVID-19**

Thank you for your understanding and cooperation.

The health and wellbeing of everyone is dependent on it.

May The Lord Bless You and Keep You Safe!

- 6) All inside services must abide by the current government mandated group size of 10 people or less per service. Multiple services are authorized, provided the worship space is cleaned properly between services, or seating is alternated to avoid potential cross contamination between one service and the other. Please note that the current mandated group size may be changed by the government with little to no warning. We will need to adjust accordingly. God willing, the 10 person limit will be lifted soon.
- 7) Appropriate cleaning and disinfecting agents (for the surface being cleaned) will be used. Common areas such as bathrooms as well as often touched items such as door knobs, light switches, handrails, etc...need to be cleaned on a regular basis. The NYS Dept. of Health or CDC websites can provide some guidance.
- 8) All inside services must provide adequate space for safe social distancing of at least six feet between individuals or family groups.
- 9) Outside services to include lawn and parking lot services may be held. Larger groups than 10 are authorized, provided each individual or family group maintains safe social distancing of at least 6 feet or more from one another. Parked cars must be six feet from one another if people are sitting in them with windows rolled down for the service.
- 10) The congregation for both indoor and outdoor services must wear masks. The Church will need to have a supply of disposable masks available for anyone who doesn't bring their own mask with them.
- 11) The clergy must wear masks when in close proximity to others, to include, the Processional, distribution of communion, and Recessional. Parishes may want to suspend the Processional and Recessional during this time to reduce the number of acolytes and others needed in the Altar Party, and thus cut down on congestion in the sanctuary. Unfortunately, the sanctuaries in many of our churches are not large enough to provide the necessary space needed for social distancing during the Coronavirus Pandemic.

- 12) The celebrant is NOT required to wear a mask while at the altar, provided they are by themselves and the bread and wine are covered with a linen or pall. Nor are the clergy required to wear a mask while proclaiming the Gospel or preaching, provided they are at least 10 feet away from the nearest person. The Gospel should be proclaimed from the front of the Church instead of the aisle as is customary in many parishes.
- 13) Hand sanitizer must be used by all people when they first arrive at Church and again right before going to receive communion, for indoor services. For outdoor services (where parishioners bring their own chairs), hand sanitizer is only needed just prior to receiving communion. I recommend each parish have someone assigned to hold the container of hand sanitizer as each person has the cleaning agent poured in their hands. This person must use the hand sanitizer first before helping others. They must also wear a mask and stand an arm lengths distance from the person they are ministering to.
- 14) Altar guild members and clergy must thoroughly wash their hands with soap and water or use hand sanitizer before setting the altar. Clergy must also clean their hands with hand sanitizer before distributing communion.
- 15) Communion will be received in only one kind (the host/bread). It will be placed in the hand of the recipient, not on their tongue. Care needs to be taken when placing the host in the person's hand in order not to physically touch them. I would ask that communion wafers be used, rather than other forms of bread. The celebrant will consume the consecrated wine on behalf of the people. Individual communion cups with wine for the congregation are NOT authorized.
- 16) Communion will be received while standing (not kneeling), preferably at the head of the center aisle, or it may be taken to people while in their pews or seats. It is important to maintain appropriate social distancing while people come to receive communion. Communion may be distributed to people sitting in their vehicles during parking lot services. Clergy should not bend over into the vehicle to distribute communion, but rather individuals should place their hands outside the car window to receive.
- 17) For those requesting a blessing rather than communion, blessings will be offered over the person while not physically touching the head of the person being blessed.
- 18) If there are any baptisms, the clergy must cleanse their hands with hand sanitizer before and after the baptism as well as wear a mask. The Baptismal water will be poured outside following the service. It will not be saved for use as Holy Water.
- 19) The Peace will need to be shared by means other than personal physical contact. Handshakes and hugs are not allowed at this time.

- 20) Choirs are not allowed at this time, due to social distancing requirements. One or two people may lead the music, provided they are at least 10 feet away from anyone around them. Some congregations may opt not to allow singing during the coronavirus pandemic. The wearing of masks by the congregation should help reduce the potential of spreading respiratory droplets while singing.
- 21) Lectors may remove their masks while reading the lessons, provided they are at least 10 feet from anyone in front of them. If the church space doesn't allow for proper distancing, the lectors need to wear masks.
- 22) The collection plate should not be passed, but rather be placed in a location that parishioners may access to make their offering.
- 23) The bread and wine should be placed on the credence table by the altar guild prior to the start of the service, and not brought up at the time of the offertory.
- 24) Congested areas need to be avoided, especially as people are trying to enter or leave the Church, as well as the communion line and other times when people tend to bunch up. Again, social distancing is very important. Clergy may stand to the side following the service (out of the flow of traffic) if someone needs to speak to them.
- 25) If possible (especially during the warmer weather) keep the windows and doors of the Church open to improve air circulation with fresh outside air.
- 26) To cut down on potential cross contamination, parishes may want to print out the service for everyone to have their own copy, or use overhead projections if they have the means of doing so, as an alternative to the use of Prayer Books and Hymnals. If Prayer Books and Hymnals are used, they will need to be sanitized if they are to be used again within three days (the potential life expectancy of the virus on objects).
- 27) Holy water fonts must be emptied and removed.
- 28) There will be no coffee hours or other social gatherings at church during the time of the pandemic. Many parishes are hosting "virtual coffee hours" that are going well and have been well received as an alternative to in-person coffee hours. Worship together at Church and then go home and visit one another online in the safety of your home, having a cup of coffee or tea and a dessert.
- 29) In-person Vacation Bible School is not permitted this summer due to the inability to maintain appropriate social distancing among kids. Parishes might consider an online version of VBS.
- 30) In-person Sunday School and Youth Group meetings are suspended until the fall, at which time a determination will be made based on the status of COVID-19.

- 31) All outside groups using Church property must practice social distancing, wear masks, use hand sanitizer when they arrive, and follow any other guidelines required by the parish during the Coronavirus Pandemic.
- 32) Unless social distancing requirements can be met, Vestry meetings and other church committees or groups need to be conducted via Zoom or by some other online means.
- 33) Virtual online, recorded and live-stream services should be continued if possible, even after in-person services resume. Not everyone is able to return to church at this time and countless others who we have not effectively reached before, are now being ministered to in very powerful and life changing ways. Keep up the good work!

Everyone's cooperation with these guidelines is greatly appreciated and needed, if we are to provide a safe environment within each of our Churches, for our parishioners and visitors to come and worship our Heavenly Father and Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May God bless each of us richly, as we gather in His name, and go forth offering ourselves as a channel of His love and mercy and healing grace during this time of the Coronavirus Pandemic.

Faithfully in Christ,

+Bill

Rt. Rev. William H. Love

Bishop of Albany

Please Note: Upon receipt and review of the above Diocesan Guidelines, the Rector or Clergy in Charge, as well as one Warden are asked to please sign and return the following form to the Diocesan Office.

Statement of Agreement

Dear Bishop Love,

The clergy and lay leadership of _____ Church in _____, acknowledge receipt of the Diocese of Albany Guidelines for resuming in-person worship and ministry within our church buildings, and pledge to abide by them to the best of our ability throughout the time of the Coronavirus Pandemic.

Faithfully in Christ,

Date _____

Clergy

Warden