

**Sunday, March 15, 2020**

**8:00 p.m.**

Sisters and brothers in Christ,

I write to you at the end of this Third Sunday in Lent instructing all congregations of the Diocese of Ohio to suspend services of public worship until further notice. As well, I ask you either to cancel or find virtual ways of gathering for all nonessential parish meetings.

It is particularly difficult to have come to this decision following a wonderful visitation this morning at St. Matthew's, Ashland, with candidates for Confirmation and Reception and a congregation of parishioners and visitors who took care to follow all the steps for safety that were asked of them. A number of our parishes have reported similar experiences, welcoming visitors from other churches whose services had been suspended and strangers who simply chose today as the day to come to church.

As well, I have received messages of gratitude from people who worshiped from home via YouTube, Zoom, Facebook, and internet downloads. I share their appreciation for all who continue laboring to provide the comfort and companionship of Christian community through worship at a distance.

Governor DeWine's news conference this afternoon, however, made it clear that the COVID-19 contagion is advancing at an unknown rate. Of the 11 counties in Ohio with confirmed cases, eight are in our diocese. As reported by Dr. Amy Acton, it is uncertain whether those reflect counties where the patient lives or where the diagnosing hospital was located. Thus, even these cases may represent a wider geographical spread. After consulting this afternoon with members of my staff, and speaking this evening with Bishop Breidenthal in the Diocese of Southern Ohio, who is of the same mind, I am certain that this is the next right thing for us to do.

We will continue to monitor the progress of the Coronavirus pandemic day by day, and regularly assess our options as we approach Holy Week and Easter, giving as much time for planning as is possible.

The following are items to which I ask your attention:

**1) Online worship options:**

Please continue to report opportunities that your parish is offering for live streamed, online, or downloadable worship, as we will attempt to make that information available to all. You can do that via this new [link](#).

**2) Non-worship meetings:**

It will be important to review what meetings of communicants are essential to be held in-person during the next few weeks. I suspect they are quite few in number. For some whom we serve, however, time spent at church for a variety of purposes provides the majority of personal contact they get every week. For bible study, prayer groups, committee meetings, and others, please explore by what other means they might be held (Zoom, FaceTime, phone, etc.) in order to continue both the good work they do and the pastoral connectedness they provide. Jessica Rocha, Diocesan Communications Director ([jrocha@dohio.org](mailto:jrocha@dohio.org)), and Beth Bergstrom, Communications Coordinator ([bbergstrom@dohio.org](mailto:bbergstrom@dohio.org)), are available to assist in exploring helpful technology. As well, time otherwise spent in church might be used to keep in touch with a phone call or note.

**3) Feeding ministries and other assistance programs:**

Those served by food and clothing ministries of our parishes will be particularly vulnerable as both health services and the economy are negatively affected. Please do whatever you can to continue providing the essential services your parish offers, if possible. This will doubtless mean adjusting distribution methods (take-out rather than dine-in) and finding volunteers outside of the high-risk demographic to replace those regular volunteers who should absent themselves because of age, illness, or immunodeficiency.

#### 4) **Self-help groups:**

The space we offer to self-help groups is very often essential for the mental, spiritual, and physical health of those they serve. To every extent that you can, please continue to make that space and time available to them. Do not hesitate to ask AA and other groups if they would sanitize tables, counters, and chairs at the conclusion of their meetings. (Some will be happy to provide wipes, etc. You might also offer to have some cleaning supplies on hand.)

#### 5) **Finances:**

Of course, many of us fulfill our financial commitment to the church by pledge payments and other contributions on Sunday mornings. During this period of suspended in-church worship, we will need to mail in our support. It may be particularly helpful to prepay as much as we are able, in order to cover any delay in giving that others may incur due to their own work situations. And please be attentive to those in your parish and community whose incomes will be reduced or who have become unemployed by the economic impact of this pandemic. An informative article from The Episcopal Network for Stewardship (TENS) is attached [here](#).

#### 6) **Clergy and Senior Wardens:**

Tomorrow, we will distribute a schedule of Zoom meetings for Tuesday and Wednesday for parish clergy and Senior Wardens by Mission Area, to give us all a chance to check in with one another and see how we can provide mutual support and share helpful resources. We will also schedule a similar meeting with non-parochial clergy and deacons. Please keep an eye out for it and participate if available.

As always, do not hesitate to contact me or members of the Bishop's Staff if you have questions, and know that you and those whom you serve are in my prayers.

The Rt. Rev. Mark Hollingsworth, Jr.

Bishop of Ohio