

An Important message from Bishop Hughes: Considerations before gatherings can resume

May 18, 2020

Dear Companions on the Journey,

We are not the first of God's people to be displaced and sent on a journey into unknown land. Abraham, Sarah, Joseph, Moses, and the Magi all set out without a map. Most started without knowing their destination, although the Magi followed a star. Our sacred text, traditions, and history show us that God guided them to the places God prepared for them.

Their journeys transformed individuals and nations. The history of God and God's people is filled with transformative journeys. We, like many of God's people before us, were displaced by a new and unknown threat – in our case the novel coronavirus, COVID-19. This disruption to our lives and livelihoods became a pathway through which our faith has been stretched and strengthened.

At some point, I do not know when, stay-at-home orders will be modified or lifted. Additionally, news outlets, websites, social media, and blogs are full of plans and videos of what others are doing as distancing is relaxed. It is natural for the laity and clergy of our diocese to wonder what is next for us. I have a few items to share with you about preparing for the journey forward, including gathering and worship in our diocese.

- 1) We remain committed to the safety of our members and clergy.** We are a denomination with significant numbers of laity and clergy over 65 years of age, the group most at risk from COVID-19 infection. We will begin evaluating ways to continue online worship for people in high-risk groups. Additionally, we will encourage those who need to be careful or who do not feel safe in gatherings to stay at home. Many of our members may not be ready for public worship of any kind. Some of our clergy may not be able to risk participation in group gatherings or leading public worship. The option of virtual worship and gathering is a vital component of health for our people and parishes.
- 2) Preparation for gatherings in church buildings and on church grounds starts with reflection:** The clergy of our diocese are in the process of meeting with members to reflect on what we left behind, what we have learned thus far, and what we might need to respond to an ongoing pandemic that may alternately relax and tighten distancing protocols for as long as two years. I am meeting with clergy and laity in every region of our diocese to discuss the same. This is an intentional act of discernment to seek God's guidance. Discernment allows us to learn and incorporate the ways God has transformed us into the next stage of our journey.
- 3) The Journey Forward Team** begins meeting this week to develop protocol guidelines for public worship and gatherings. The team is chaired by the Rev. Vicki McGrath, All Saints', Millington, and Ms. Pat. McKenzie, Church of the Saviour, Denville, and includes clergy and laity from every region in our diocese. The guidelines will help parishes prepare

Church Building Re-entry Plans. The plans must be approved by the Bishop's Office before churches are opened for gatherings of any kind.

- 4) **We will not rush re-entry of buildings.** After stay-at-home orders are modified or ended, and gatherings of ten people or more are restored, it will be a minimum of fourteen (14) additional days before gatherings may resume in our churches. Some parishes may choose not to gather for a longer period of time, based on the needs of the congregation. Current protocols for handwashing, distancing, and cleaning will continue as advised by public health authorities such as the CDC and NJ Department of Health. **Until we are ready to return to our churches, our buildings and grounds remain closed to public worship or gatherings and my instructions to the clergy concerning weddings and funerals stand.**
- 5) **Our commitment to caring for the community around us continues.** Our acts of mercy and advocacy for the people forced by their jobs to take greater health risks have grown in importance. Our solidarity with the hungry, unemployed, mourning, and disproportionately infected is vital to the health of our surrounding communities. The same conditions will exist even as staying at home is modified. Our ministry to the most vulnerable of God's people will be as important as it has ever been.

The past two months of our journey in pandemic have been shaped by untold and unexpected grief, fear, and worry. At the same we have experienced the steadfast comfort and abundant blessings of God's grace and mercy at even the darkest times. The disruption caused by pandemic has changed us. Laity, deacons, priests, and bishop – all of our lives have been altered in various ways. Our priorities have shifted. We have come to see our family, friends, and faith as treasured and cherished gifts. God has consistently used this adverse situation to grow our faith, expand our love of neighbor, and deepen our spiritual practices. Many of us have shared the good news of God's love via social media, becoming 21st-century evangelists for the first time.

At the Regional Ministry Network and Weekly Clergy meetings, an irrepressible hope for the future of our church is shared by laity and clergy across our diocese. We have come to see God's care for us as more than a blessing. Indeed, we see God shaping and transforming us into a more responsive, flexible, spiritually mature, and justice-oriented church focused on God's people beyond our parish doors. We see ourselves as called to share God's love with a world in great need of God's loving and life-giving presence.

In many ways we are like the newly sent apostles in the Acts of the Apostles. Instructed by Jesus, touched by the Holy Spirit and yet unsure of next steps, they prayed, discerned, and stepped into their journey to share the love and faith Jesus gave them. More than 2,000 years later we continue the journey forward, trusting God to guide us into a transformed church. As we prepare to re-enter church buildings, we bring the fullness of our journey with us. We do not seek a return to the past. Instead in we continue to journey each day into the church God needs us to be for this time and for the future.

Grace and peace,

The Rt. Rev. Carlye J. Hughes

XI Bishop of Newark