



The Episcopal Diocese of East Carolina

The Right Reverend Robert S. Skirving, Bishop

Wednesday, May 13, 2020

To the People of the Episcopal Diocese of East Carolina

Dear Friends in Christ,

Our Easter journey has come to a crossroads.

For the past two months, public worship has been suspended in the congregations of our diocese as we have worked together towards the goal of halting the spread of COVID-19 across eastern North Carolina, our nation and the world. We have struggled to live within limitations and restrictions imposed by leaders of government while we have watched so many numbers rise: the number of Americans who have become sick and the number who have died; the number of our people who have lost their jobs and the number who have struggled to keep their businesses open.

Our gospel reading for the 3rd Sunday of Easter offered us the image of two of Jesus' disciples walking together on the road to Emmaus on the same day as the grave of Jesus had been found to be open and empty. Grieving and confused, they did not recognize the stranger who joined them on their journey that day. Only when they stopped for the evening and, as their guest, he took, blessed, broke and gave the bread to them were they able to recognize him as their risen Lord. Then, and only then, could they look back on their journey and recognize that their hearts had been burning as he had walked with them and spoken to them from the scriptures.

Our Easter journey, this year, has been filled with experiences and emotions beyond what most of us could ever have imagined. And now we have reached a significant crossroads in this journey. Our Governor has eased restrictions for citizens of North Carolina and so we are now free to worship publicly again, within certain limitations. Effective today, therefore, I am removing the suspension on public worship that I initiated on March 13, 2020. With this letter, I am attaching guidelines for clergy and congregations to use in making decisions about when they will return to public worship, and how our worship will need to be modified.

Our Easter journey will continue, not back to the familiar patterns of life before COVID-19, but into a land that we have never before encountered. As we make this journey together, let us be mindful that Jesus walks with us and will be our constant companion in the face of all that lies ahead.

Yours in Christ,

Robert S. Skirving

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The Next Steps of our Easter Journey

In his April 29th “Word to the Church: What Would Love Do?” Presiding Bishop Michael Curry offered us the image of a “rubric of love.” Drawing on our Anglican/Episcopal use of rubrics (small, italicized print, once in red) for shaping how a Book of Common Prayer liturgy should be planned and conducted, Bishop Curry speaks of the sort of love that ought to shape our lives as disciples of Jesus. He writes, “Jesus makes it abundantly clear that the way of unselfish, sacrificial love – love that seeks the good and the well-being of others as well as the self – that love is the rubric of the Christian life. If you haven’t read Bishop Curry’s letter, you can find a link to it in the resources offered at the end of this document.

All that follows is offered in that same spirit. As we take the next steps of our Easter journey we will be walking paths that none of us have ever traveled. We do not walk them alone, however. Jesus walks with us and is our constant companion and guide. The first part of this document is intended to lead congregations through the steps of deciding whether or not they are ready for a return to public worship, within the limitations, restrictions and guidelines – the rubrics – that are included. The second part of this document offers “rubrics” for the shape of our worship in the days ahead.

In everything that we do, we ought to look beyond our own needs as individuals and as congregations. How will the decisions we make and the actions that we take contribute to the prevention of further spread of COVID-19? How will the decisions we make and the actions that we take demonstrate our love for all who suffer in body, mind or spirit? How will the decisions we make and the actions that we take support us in striving for justice and peace among all people, and in respecting the dignity of every human being?

Congregations are encouraged to take the next steps carefully, mindful that our decisions and our actions will have an impact both for our congregations and also for the wider communities of which we are a part. As we take these next steps, let us remember that our risen Lord Jesus walks with us.

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Preparing for a Return to Public Worship

Now that Governor Cooper has led the State of North Carolina in beginning to reopen our public life after an extended “stay at home” order, the congregations of the Episcopal Diocese of East Carolina may begin making preparations for a return to public worship. Effective Wednesday, May 13, 2020 the suspension on public worship has been lifted, and congregations of the Diocese may begin planning to resume public worship within the following parameters.

- ❖ The decision to resume public worship must be made separately by each congregation, with the Clergy and Churchwardens working together. Before resuming public worship, a congregation must develop a detailed plan for public worship and must follow this plan each week. This plan must respect and incorporate all/any requirements of state and local leaders of government.
- ❖ Congregations are free to worship publicly as soon as Sunday, May 17, 2020 but may make the decision to wait longer until they are confident that they can be safe in worshipping publicly. Online worship may continue as the norm for some time, and as an option for the indefinite future.
- ❖ Congregations must abide by all aspects of our Governor’s current and future Executive Orders, including any limits placed on Mass Gatherings. At present, we are in Phase One of our State’s plan to reopen public life, and gatherings of more than ten persons are largely prohibited. An exception has been granted for gatherings that take place outdoors for the purpose of worship, for which there is no limit on numbers so long as people follow the “Recommendations to Promote Social Distancing and Reduce Transmission.” A link to Executive Order No. 138 is included in the Resource section at the end of these guidelines.
- ❖ The Governor’s “Recommendations to Promote Social Distancing and Reduce Transmission” offer steps for reducing transmission of COVID-19, and individuals are strongly advised to follow these steps when leaving their homes. Congregations must promote these steps with their members, and must encourage their members to follow these steps when participating in public worship. Here is a summary of those steps, which can be found in full detail in the Executive Order:
 - Maintain at least six feet of physical distancing.
 - Wear a cloth face covering indoors, and also outdoors when physical distance of six feet cannot be maintained.
 - Carry and regularly use hand sanitizer.
 - Frequently wash hands using soap and water.
 - Regularly clean all high touch surfaces.
 - Stay at home if sick.

- ❖ Congregations must encourage all high-risk individuals to stay home rather than risk the chance of infection. A link to the CDC resource titled “People Who Are at Higher Risk for Severe Illness” is included in the Resources section, in order that you have helpful language to use about what constitutes “high-risk.” Please remember, many of our clergy are themselves high-risk individuals, and must be afforded appropriate consideration and support in a congregation’s plans for a return to public worship.
- ❖ Congregational decisions and plans must be communicated to its member effectively, in advance of public worship, so that members are more able to support and follow these plans.

Congregations should not launch their return to public worship until they are fully able to do so within the parameters detailed above, and within the guidelines and requirements detailed in **Planning for Public Worship**, which follows. Remember, it is entirely appropriate for congregational leaders to make the decision to wait for a time before returning to public worship. Congregations found to be hosting public worship outside of these parameters will be asked to amend their practices, or face a decision by the Bishop to suspend their public worship for a time.

Planning for Public Worship

Besides working within the parameters detailed in **Preparing for a Return to Public Worship**, congregations seeking to resume public worship must incorporate the guidelines and requirements detailed below as their “rubrics” in developing the plan that they will communicate with their membership and implement in each gathering.

Cleaning

Before each gathering of public worship, all high touch surfaces must be thoroughly and properly cleaned. A link to the CDC guidelines for “Community and Faith-Based Organizations” is included in the Resources section. These guidelines include detailed information about proper cleaning. For outdoor worship, chairs being carried outside for use by the congregation will need to be cleaned before use. Altar Guild members, or others setting up for worship, must be particularly mindful of this requirement.

Seating

For outdoor worship, chairs will need to be set up so as to maintain physical distancing of at least six feet. Those attending from the same household may sit together, but others must maintain proper physical distance. Individuals should not mix during worship. In case of rain or other inclement weather, outdoor worship must be cancelled. It cannot be moved indoors. Those planning to attend worship might be invited to bring their own lawn chairs, and will be expected to follow the same criteria for physical distancing.

When the time comes that we are free to worship indoors, in numbers greater than ten, congregations using chairs should set up according to a pattern similar to that described above, for outdoor worship. For congregations with pews, seating could be marked to indicate proper physical distancing, and ushers should assist those present in keeping appropriate distance from one another.

Particularly when we are able to worship publicly indoors again, a plan must be developed to ensure that attendance does not exceed limits set by the Governor. Larger congregations may choose to multiply the number of liturgies offered. Ushers will need to be prepared to monitor attendance and tactfully invite those who would cause attendance to exceed the limit to return for another liturgy. Smaller congregations should anticipate the possibility that members of neighboring congregations may seek to join them for worship, thereby challenging attendance limits. Online worship may continue to be an option for many, for the indefinite future.

Worship

For a time, congregations may choose to continue to offer Morning or Evening Prayer as their form of worship. This may allow members to be back together more quickly, before the congregation is confident in celebrating the Holy Eucharist.

Worship must be modified in order to prevent unnecessary physical contact during the liturgy. Worship leaders must model physical distancing, wear cloth face coverings, wash hands with soap and water before worship and use hand sanitizer during worship, before and after touching anything that others would touch.

Offering plates must not be passed from person to person. Plates or baskets can be set out in safe, prominent locations to receive offerings according to directions given during the liturgy.

It would be best if prayer books and hymnals are handled as little as possible. If practical, congregations may choose to remove them from the church. Printed bulletins, distributed safely, might be a better option. Some congregations may choose to project all words and music that will be needed by the congregation.

At this time, there must be no congregational or choral singing in public worship, as singing has been identified as a particularly risky behavior for the spread of COVID-19. This decision will be regularly reviewed. Soloists may sing publicly, if they practice physical distancing and wear a face covering. Alternatively, at this time congregations may choose to include only instrumental or recorded music during public worship.

Nursery care and children's Christian formation must not be offered during worship until limits and restrictions have been removed to the point of this being a safe option.

Holy Eucharist

As with all public worship, those leading must practice physical distancing, wear face coverings, and wash and sanitize their hands properly. This provision extends to those who will be at the altar for the celebration of Holy Eucharist.

The number of individuals handling the vessels and elements of Holy Eucharist must be minimized. Those setting up for the Eucharist, including Altar Guild members, must ensure that all vessels are properly and regularly cleaned.

There must be no physical contact during the Exchange of the Peace. Movement around the worship space should be limited in ways that allow those present to maintain proper physical spacing.

Celebrants must consecrate both bread and wine during celebrations of the Eucharist. For now, the chalice of wine must be left on the altar and not offered to those present. This provides an opportunity to teach that receiving communion "in one kind" is a satisfactory option, at least in theological terms. As restrictions are eased, we will reconsider decisions regarding the common cup.

Eucharistic ministers must use hand sanitizer before and after handling the bread of communion, and must do everything possible to maintain physical distance from members of the congregation. During communion, we ought not to use altar rails unless physical distancing can be maintained. We would be better to have those present come to the front of the nave to receive communion, practicing physical distancing on their way forward and on their way back. An argument may be made that there is no method of sharing communion that is without at least some risk. Congregational leadership must make a careful decision about the method that makes most sense in their situation, while minimizing the risk of transmission as much as possible. In principle, the risk of transmission will be lower when fewer people have the chance

to touch the bread. Those receiving communion should be instructed not to remove their face covering to consume the bread until they are physically distant from others present.

Congregations may choose to incorporate the practice of “spiritual communion” into Eucharistic liturgies, recognizing that some of those who are present may choose not to come forward for communion at this time.

Ministry with Children and Young People

In all of our efforts, care and consideration must be given to the full inclusion of our children and young people in public worship. Our youngest children may have a difficult time sitting still and staying with their own family, and so extra patience and creativity will be needed in order to ensure that they are able to safely practice proper physical distancing.

Plans for special ministries with children and young people should be planned within the limitations and restrictions of our Governor’s Executive Order, including Vacation Bible Schools, Day Camps, Mission Trips or other special activities. Those seeking assistance in planning for ministry with our children and young people should check the materials gathered by Emily Gowdy-Canady, of our Diocesan House staff, and linked from the Resources section of this document. They are titled, “Reset: Spring 2020 Formation Update.” Emily may be reached through Diocesan House if you would appreciate some additional support in making good decisions.

Coffee and Reception

At this time, congregations must not offer coffee gatherings or other forms of reception following worship. As limits are raised and restrictions eased, we will reconsider this in the future.

Baptism

Ideally, those seeking baptism will be prepared to wait for a time longer, until we are able to gather more easily and with fewer restrictions. If that is neither possible nor desired, clergy have permission to proceed with public baptisms. All preventive measures such as physical distancing, face covering, hand washing and sanitizing must be kept, in all ways that are practical. Additionally, the baptismal water must be made fresh for each person to be baptized. Celebrants are to bless all of the water to be used in one prayerful act, rather than using separate prayers of blessing each time the water is changed. It may be an alternate font should be used in order to better facilitate the changing of the water.

Visits of the Bishop

The Bishop will plan to consult with each congregation that he is scheduled to visit, in order that he understands and supports the plan in place for the offering of public worship. As with Baptism, it might be advisable that Confirmations wait until limits are raised and restrictions eased. When that time comes, it remains the Bishop’s intent to offer a series of

regional liturgies that will include the opportunity for Confirmation. If you wish for the Bishop's visit to include Confirmation, you will need to discuss this possibility with him.

In Conclusion

As the Governor's next Executive Orders are published, and as we learn together from this new work that we will be doing, updates will be offered regarding practices of worship.

Remember, these materials are offered in the spirit of what Bishop Curry has called "a rubric of love." The work involved in a safe return to public worship might be greater than a congregation is yet ready to take on. Making the decision to wait a little longer, and to prepare carefully, might be the best decision that you can make right now.

We do not walk this road alone. Our risen Lord Jesus will be with us every step of the way. May our hearts burn within us as we take the next steps of this Easter journey!

Resources

Bishop Curry's "Word to the Church: What Would Love Do?"

<https://episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/presiding-bishop-michael-currys-word-church-what-would-love-do>

Executive Order No. 138 of the Governor of North Carolina

<https://files.nc.gov/governor/documents/files/EO138-Phase-1.pdf>

CDC: People Who Are at Higher Risk for Severe Illness

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-at-higher-risk.html>

CDC: Community and Faith-Based Organizations

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html>

Reset – Spring 2020 Formation Update

<https://conta.cc/2xG8YgS>