

CANCELLATION OF CHURCH GATHERINGS

A Pastoral Direction to the Clergy and Parochial Lay Leaders of West Missouri from Bishop Martin S. Field

In recent days, in a multitude of emails and during many phone conversations, friends and colleagues have shared their good wishes, supportive thoughts, and assured me of their prayers as I attempt to provide leadership for the Episcopal Church in West Missouri. Thank you, all of you. I appreciate those prayers more than you can know. It is, indeed, a weighty and challenging time to be a leader and to search for and navigate the right path between over- and under-reaction.

Some also raised the question: *“Bishop, do you intend to cancel worship services?”* You’ll not be surprised that this is much on my mind. Some, assuming the imminent cessation of gatherings, have wanted to talk about plans to have worship and faith formation via streaming, webinar classes, recorded opportunities for daily prayer, etc.

Up to this point, my answer has been “No”. I didn’t think the time had yet arrived. It has now. Yesterday, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (aka the CDC) issued a nationwide plea for no groups to gather if they are 50 or more in number. I believe we must accept that wisdom and act in accordance with the CDC’s recommendation. To do otherwise would be a serious breach of the moral imperative to act as community, not just as individuals — to be our brothers’ and sisters’ keeper.

Pastoral Direction

Therefore, starting at 12:01 a.m. this Wednesday, March 18, 2020, and until further notice, the buildings of the parishes and congregations of West Missouri are closed to all gatherings. Furthermore, no parochially sponsored gatherings will be held in any other meeting places (e.g. homes, pubs, etc.). Exceptions for small group gatherings may be granted, and I may grant such exceptions after consultation with the leadership of the parish or congregation.

I am aware that some of our congregations have an average attendance under 50, and therefore, might feel the CDC notice should not apply to them. I am, nevertheless, making this Pastoral Direction applicable to all 47 congregations and parishes of the diocese because much of the membership of our churches (small, medium, or large) is in the most at-risk demographic: people over 60.

Reflection on the Nature of Community in a Time of Social Distancing

Recently, we’ve all come to know a new term: ***social distancing***. Experts in infectious disease control strongly advise that we limit social contact, that we distance ourselves from others. This tries my theology severely and troubles my heart! I abhor the idea of enforced isolation from one another. Some have found a life of solitude to be a path to

God, but that doesn't work for me. I feel a deep need for community. In the creation story in Genesis 2 (v. 18f), God says, "It is not good for the *adam* (the human) to be alone." Though I'm an introvert by nature, I need community with others. It feeds me. This is true for most. God built us for community.

Yet, sometimes it is necessary to be faithful to our community by being alone, by being separated one from another. A time of global pandemic is one of those times. My listening, reading, and research have revealed that, try though we might to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, assembly is the real enemy. Our efforts at hand sanitizing, avoiding the common cup, waving during the Passing of the Peace instead of hugging or shaking hands, and all that we might try will not be proof against the spread of the coronavirus. Only absolute social distancing can prevent exposure. Now, as I write that sentence, a picture pops into my head of a cabin high up a mountain in a secluded area of jungle or arctic slope far from West Missouri. In other words, there is no way to gain the social distancing necessary to prevent exposure — at least not here.

How Shall We Maintain Community?

And yet, I believe worshipping as a community is necessary for the spiritual welfare of the people. Our worship brings hope and comfort in times of fear, and the word "fear" certainly characterizes the moment in which we live.

Therefore, without gathering in person, we need to stay in connection as local communities and as a diocesan community. The Church must continue its core ministries of worship and pastoral care without a break. Accordingly, I encourage each parish (or self-arranged groups of parishes) to explore all means possible to stay in touch with members for pastoral care, to provide opportunities of worship and prayer, to study scripture, and to pursue other means of faith formation. Use the internet, phones, even snail mail. Stream services. Post audio recordings of Morning and Evening Prayer on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, etc. Gather Bible studies on Google Hangouts, Facebook Live, etc. Be creative. Be aided by the resources available to help you, such as Kim Snodgrass and Kat Mercer for setting up online Faith Formation, Gary Allman or your local IT expert for making the technology work, or other members of the diocese's staff for any other needs.

Also, if you don't already have it, build the capacity to receive financial contributions (online as well as by snail mail) and remind your members that the financial obligations of congregations and parishes will not be taking a break for the duration of the COVID-19 threat. This is especially crucial in some of our congregations that lack the financial margin to go a week or two without receiving offerings.

Pushing Forward Together

Please, share whatever plans you have in place, or plans you develop, with my office. We are building and publishing a roster of opportunities such as I have described above. I also intend, personally, to offer periodic meditations and/or sermons online,

and these will be included in the roster of online opportunities. That roster will be updated weekly, and Emily Davenport is in charge of building the list (816-471-6161, ext. 103 or bishopsassistant@diowestmo.org). Please submit your weekly roster of events or changes to your schedule to Emily by noon on Wednesdays, and an updated roster will be online by Thursday.

This moment presents us with a unique opportunity for considering faith from a new angle: what does it mean to be people of faith when the going gets rough, and the challenges are real, and the stakes are high? Such considerations have the potential to be highly formational, even *transformational*, and are much akin to the context of the Church in the time of the plagues and at other historic periods when the world seemed to be more frightening than friendly.

It is Lent. Easter and Holy Week are coming. We will not gather for our usual rites. But my fellow bishop, Mark VanKoevering, Bishop of Lexington, offers a connection to what we are going to do and our Lenten journey. He wrote, "I am loathe to cancel services, but I . . . think that I must humbly ask our faith communities to practice a Lenten fast of public worship . . . as a sign of love for one's neighbor especially the most vulnerable."

My brother bishop speaks eloquently and captures exactly how I feel.

God bless you as you faithfully pursue ministry in this unprecedented context.

Peace be with you and yours,

+Bishop Marty