

Message from Bishop Haynes: Holy Week, Triduum and Easter during coronavirus/COVID-19

On March 12, we directed Episcopal communities in our Diocese to suspend all church activities including gatherings for public worship for a period of two weeks in an effort to stop the spread of COVID-19 disease caused by the now pandemic coronavirus. At that time that we promised that would re-evaluate by March 26. I think it is safe to say that even with March 26 still a few days away, we all realize that our time of social distancing will extend far beyond that date. The Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization have suggested a period of up to 8 weeks. Sadly, these 8 weeks encompass our most sacred times of Holy Week and Easter, a time when more people gather to receive the Eucharist than at any other time. How can we NOT gather, we wonder? And yet, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has asked us to do just that and to encourage and engage online and in-home resources for worship. ([See the Presiding Bishop's statement here](#))

In light of Bishop Curry's advice, the advice of health professionals monitoring the pandemic and the directions of government officials, public gatherings for worship continue to be suspended in the Diocese of Southern Virginia until further notice - a time frame which regrettably includes the liturgies for Holy Week and Easter.

While I deeply appreciate the enthusiasm and creativity of priests from different parts of the Diocese who have proposed alternative ways of celebrating the Eucharist which might, if very carefully employed, still observe the requirements of social distancing and sanitation, I am not able to authorize those at this time. My reasons are two-fold. First, even though the risks of disease transmission might be mitigated, at least in part, in a "parking lot Eucharist," where the Sacrament is delivered to opened car windows, the risk of transmission would not be eliminated. Likewise with consecrated hosts that are left on the doorsteps of shut-in parishioners. Because we do not yet completely understand the extent of that risk, health officials are cautioning against it. Secondly, as Christians, we are called to attend to the well-being of our neighbor - essentially the good of our communities. Our community officials have asked us to observe a policy of social distancing. As Christian citizens, it behooves us to model adherence to those policies rather than look for exceptions that would enable us to circumvent them, or ways to be excused from them, however well-intentioned our efforts.

Likewise, I cannot authorize any electronic consecration, or consecrating of elements over the internet. We live an embodied faith which means physical presence. Our current practices require the *actual* laying on of hands, not a virtual laying on of hands.

These are all painful, difficult decisions. Since the Liturgical Reform Movement of the 1970's, we have been a church centered on the Eucharist. We believe that Christ is powerfully revealed present to us in the breaking of the bread. However, I would encourage you to consider and remember that Jesus is revealed to us in other ways as well - in Scripture, in the kindnesses and loving actions of others, in our reaching out in whatever way we can to the poor and marginalized. Perhaps God is working through this crisis to reveal to us additional ways to connect to Him and the saving work of His Son. Perhaps our task now is to explore and create new ways to live our Baptismal Promises even in the face of this coronavirus.

We will be working with you in the next days and weeks to gather resources for use in the homes of all those associated with your parishes to offer ways to observe Holy Week, the Triduum and Easter in their individual homes, rather than in large worship gatherings. We will also continue to make [online resources available](#). Please do not hesitate to contact us. While we all want to help you, in particular, Canon Lynn Farlin (Canon for Formation) and Ms. Ann Turner (Diocesan Communications Officer) are especially equipped to assist you in staying connected with your parishes and each other.

I do realize that none of this is news that you wanted to hear today. I did not want to deliver it. I do want to remind you, however, that in this time when social isolation might cause us to feel disconnected and separate, there is nothing, absolutely nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ (Romans 8:38-39). **Not even the coronavirus!** And if we all make our life in Christ, from whom we are joined, then we cannot be separated from one other either!

With love and every blessing,
Bishop Susan