

March 15, 2020

Dear Friends,

As I have said previously, the COVID-19 pandemic is an evolving situation presenting new challenges to us on a daily basis. Researchers are still learning about the virus itself, how the virus is spread, who is most vulnerable to infection, and the various ways in which the disease progresses for those infected.

Once again our landscape has changed late this afternoon. The Centers for Disease Control altered its guidelines for large gatherings. Crowds are hubs for spreading the coronavirus. And given the increase in numbers of those testing positive for the virus, the CDC has called for a suspension of gatherings of 50 or more people.

How shall we continue to be the Church under such circumstances?

For starters, we will remember that the people are the Church. Not a building. Not a specific church service. The Body is the Church. Where we are and how we live and move and have our being is the Church being the Church. So the question is simply, how will we be ourselves as Jesus-followers in our current situation?

Just last week I issued a set of guidelines for worshipping together. However, based on the new CDC guidelines I direct that all public, face-to-face services of the congregations in this Diocese be suspended immediately. This suspension will be in effect through at least Sunday, March 29. The CDC urged eight weeks. However, I will watch how things unfold. As information becomes available I will communicate to you that I have either extended or lifted this suspension.

Those congregations equipped to offer virtual worship should do so, making certain to clearly publicize when such services will occur and how they can be accessed. I advise the use of Morning Prayer using the Sunday Lectionary including a short sermon. A simple how-to link for live-streaming can be found here: <https://diocesela.org/live-streaming/>.

I will offer Morning Prayer each Sunday at 10:00 a.m. CDT using Facebook Live. My own first attempt taught me several lessons and I look forward to a much better result next time. Thank you to all those who participated. To join me for Morning Prayer next Sunday go to this link: <https://www.facebook.com/bishopjakeowensby/>. Or, just search for @bishopjakeowensby in Facebook. If you like this page, you will receive a notification in Facebook that I'm live-streaming.

Worship strengthens us for service in the world. In a time of pandemic I call your attention to checking in by phone or other electronic means on each other. Reach out to the sick, the lonely, the frightened, the bereaved, and the overwhelmed. Seek ways to lighten the financial burden on those who lose income because of this outbreak. Some will struggle to pay the rent or the mortgage. Money will run short for utilities, grocery, and medications. We are all in this together. Be generous and be mindful of the needs of others. Do not forget that your congregation

continues to need your financial support. Even with suspended services, they too must meet salaries and pay light bills.

Finally, let's remember why we are taking the measures we are taking. We are not doubling down on self-preservation at the expense of loving our neighbor. On the contrary, the social distancing we undertake by suspending public gatherings will help us flatten the curve. We can slow the spread of the disease so that our medical system is not overwhelmed with too many patients at one time. This makes it possible for those needing a hospital bed and life-saving equipment to have access to them. We will literally be saving our neighbors' lives. That sounds like love to me.

In Christ's Love,

+Jake

The Rt. Rev. Jacob W. Owensby, PhD, DD
4th Bishop of Western Louisiana