

Bishop Mariann Announces Two-Week Cancellation of Public Worship Services

March 11, 2020

*God is our refuge and strength,
A very present help in trouble.
Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth be moved. . .*
Psalm 46

Dear Friends of the Diocese of Washington,

In uncertain times, each of us has the responsibility to make choices for the public good. Now that the COVID-19 coronavirus has arrived in our communities, those choices become even more important.

As your bishop, my highest priority is the health, safety and well-being of our people, with particular concern for the most vulnerable. It is also our collective responsibility as Christians to be good neighbors, and to do our part to protect the social fabric upon which many lives depend.

As a diocese, we have been closely monitoring the spread of COVID-19 in Washington and Maryland, and the most recent recommendations from civic and public health leaders. Two things are now clear: social distance is needed to stop the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus, and the populations most at risk are highly represented among our congregations and clergy.

As a result, and in consultation with Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, **I am directing that all public worship services and normal parish operations be cancelled within the Episcopal Diocese of Washington and parish buildings be closed for two weeks, effective Thursday March 12.** On March 25, we will assess the situation, and our hope is to reopen for Sunday worship services on March 29. This does not pertain to schools that function within church buildings that must determine their own response to present circumstances.

In the interim, we invite all members of the diocese to join us online for virtual worship services at Washington National Cathedral on Sunday March 15 and Sunday March 22. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry will preach on March 15 and I will preach on March 22. All Cathedral worship services can be accessed via www.cathedral.org, or on the Cathedral's Facebook page.

Some congregations already have the capacity for on-line and telephone based worship gatherings, while others are just beginning to explore that option. We are gathering online worship and meeting resources on the diocesan website and will send

a link to that site tomorrow, as well as information regarding pastoral care, emergency financial assistance, and virtual gatherings throughout the diocese.

My goal in cancelling services and providing a virtual option for all in the diocese is to free up the time and energy of clergy and lay leadership across the diocese to assess the pastoral needs of your people and to reach out to civic partners, so that we aid in the care of our communities.

I am painfully aware of the significance of this change, and what it will mean for people all across this region. I understand the spiritual and financial implications, the headaches and frustrations, and I share this disappointment that we, as worshipping communities, will not be able to gather.

However, I am equally aware of the responsibilities we have as people of faith who follow the one who came among us as one who served. Not only do we have a moral, religious and civic obligation to take whatever steps are necessary to aid our communities in stemming the spread of this virus, we exist in order to love and serve our neighbors. It is what faith communities do best in times of need.

To be sure, we will have situations or particular needs arise at individual parishes that need attention or consideration, and I invite our clergy to contact diocesan staff for guidance.

We are indeed in uncharted waters -- not just as a diocese, but as a country and as a global human family. As people of faith, these are the times for us to draw closer to God and to look to the Scriptures, where we can find comfort and reassurance:

“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
Romans 8: 37-39

Faithfully,

+Mariann