

Dear People of God:

The current Coronavirus Pandemic continues. Since March 2020, we have been living into a new reality.

Last year, we expected this to subside in a few weeks. Then, we looked to Lent...then Easter...then Pentecost...and then Christmas. One year later, we are still cautious, but we are also optimistic about the future.

Within the State of West Virginia, numbers appear to be steadily declining. While the daily number of infections seem to remain stable, the number of active cases throughout the State have been cut in half from some months ago.

A year ago, we shuttered the doors of our church buildings. Then we re-opened them with serious restrictions. I knew then, and I continue to be reminded, that not everyone agreed with the decisions that were made. I continue to receive letters and emails telling me to reopen all church buildings, and I continue to receive letters and emails thanking me for keeping the Episcopal Flock safe and healthy.

Overall, I believe that one day, when I have a face to face meeting with Jesus, I will say that I tried my best, with the information given to us at the time, to keep the flock entrusted to me safe.

To date - while there have been parishioners and clergy who have contracted the virus, and some have even died, there are no outbreaks traceable to any activities of Diocesan churches or acts of public worship.

I applaud our clergy, parishioners and all those who have worked in difficult circumstances to continue to proclaim the Gospel, while keeping people safe. I thank you!

As the numbers have declined, and as Holy Week and Easter are fast approaching, I have been asked to consider possibly expanding the re-opening of buildings and programs.

I agree, and I know that the 'one size fits all' has been successful (though frustrating for some) in keeping us safe, but is not right for each parish.

So, let me offer a new set of Protocols for The Diocese of West Virginia:

1. If the County in which the parish resides has moved from a lesser color to RED, we will permit parishes to continue holding public services, but with only 10 Domiciled units. All other precautions (no wine, masks, socially distanced, hand sanitizer, no physical passing of the Peace, no singing, etc) must be followed.
2. If the county is not in the Red, then parishes may re-open on new Protocols:
 - a. Socially distanced, a building may re-open up to a seating capacity of 40%, based on the size of the Nave. Pews are to be marked off. No physical passing of the Peace. Families may sit together, but others must stay at least 6 feet apart. While

the eucharistic elements may be consecrated, no wine (or Chalice) is to be dispensed. Hosts or Bread only.

- b. In smaller buildings, the 15 domiciled units may still be the standard for capacity.
 - c. If a parish chooses to hold services outdoors, then the numeric limits are lifted, provided that the 6 foot interval is maintained, and no singing is permitted. All other protocols and expectations shall be followed.
 - d. Indoors, up to 2 soloists, masked and distanced, may sing. Outdoors, a parish may have up to 4 soloists, masked and distanced.
 - e. Instrumentalists are permitted, but what I have discovered is that almost all wind instruments are dangerous! The safest, I am told, is the tuba.
 - f. Coffee Hour and Fellowship time are still not to be held, at this time!
3. Parish programs and ministries may begin to consider how they will re-open. Sunday Schools are somewhat problematic, due to the shared small confines. However, with proper distancing, sanitizing and physical protections, they may re-open in early June. (just in time for Summer break, I suppose)

In all of this, the ministry of Christ continues!

We must not let our guard down. If you do not feel comfortable or safe, please stay home, and visit your parish online. Spiritual Communion is still available throughout the Diocese and throughout The Episcopal Church!

If a clergyperson or a vestry does not feel comfortable, stay the course! As I have said previously, it is better to open a week late rather than a day too early.

We are called to be brothers and sisters to one another. Jesus said his command is to "Love one another, as I have loved you." Love means protecting one another and caring for the safety of our brothers and sisters.

We will continue to monitor the safety of all of our parishes, and if necessary, return to more stringent protocols. But at this time in light of the coming Resurrection, we rejoice in the love so freely poured out to us but our Savior.

Please be assured of my prayers for you, as we go forward, and I ask for your prayers.

Faithfully

The Rt Rev W Michie Klusmeyer
Bishop of West Virginia