



THE REFORMED EPISCOPAL CHURCH
OFFICE FOR THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA
A Founding Member of the Province of the
ANGLICAN CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA

Third Thursday in Lent

March 19, 2020

Dear RE Brethren:

Lenten greetings as the Lord provides the lessons of the Cross in the midst of great trial for the Church and for our nation!

I am writing to ask that all of our churches suspend temporarily their present way of publicly offering services of worship involving more than ten people. My strong recommendation is based on the request of Archbishop Foley Beach and the College of Bishops, which includes the Reformed Episcopal Bishops (See the archbishop's statement on the ACNA website).

Considering the data and requirements of the Centers for Disease Control and the instructions of the President of the United States, we believe it is important for the Church to support in every way the mitigation of the COVID-19 pandemic to protect and save lives. As believers in Jesus Christ we are called to, "Love our neighbor." To reduce the way we gather, that others might be helped, is the least we can do to prevent illness and the loss of life. Before this crisis is over, we need to do so much more with the love of Christ to reach our society in many other charitable ways.

At the same time our Lord commanded us to, "Love the Lord thy God." Please do not misunderstand. I am not asking our churches to stop worshipping our Triune God. Instead, we should continue to offer the Divine Liturgy in ways that can comply with the call for minimal social contact. We are blessed to have the technology to provide worship via online means (i.e. streaming, recording, etc.). To this end for our Sunday worship, I suggest either Morning Prayer with a sermon, or a small Holy Communion/sermon service with a presbyter and attendants only. I hope as well that all of our churches are saying the Daily Office of Morning and Evening Prayer.

It has also been suggested that small missions and churches could offer multiple Eucharistic or Morning Prayer services on a Sunday to groups of ten or less. To do so would require figuring out how to divide and direct your congregation. I strongly suggest only receiving in one kind if it's a service of Holy Communion, per my last communication's instructions. Even with this approach, however, I caution that folks can come to these smaller services, who have unknowingly contracted the virus and spread it to others. This has already happened in other denominations. The safest approach is therefore to follow the above call for altering worship to an online venue.

Please keep in mind that in days prior to the advent of modern technology, this type of instruction had to be given in other situations of extreme duress. During WWII after the tragic bombing of Coventry Cathedral, the Church of England Bishops had to ask the people in London and other larger cities not to attend the cathedrals and city churches out of concern that the latter places of worship had become prime targets for bombing. Unfortunately, they didn't have the technology to offer worship by electronic means. Still, the people of God said the Daily Office, in time God prevailed, and worship was restored. These kinds of difficult directives sometimes need to be given to protect life, knowing that the worship of the Church will continue other ways and eventually be restored in larger gatherings.

To comply with what our Archbishop and College of Bishops are asking in response to official directives, please know that I have suspended our own regular Sunday worship services at Church of the Holy Communion Cathedral in Dallas, Texas, until Palm Sunday. At the end of the next two weeks, we will have an opportunity to reassess the matter further. I will send out another communication as to where we go from that point. If necessary, we may have to extend our measures longer. If so, I will offer additional suggestions as to how we do might do this.

I can only add and caution that, if you and your congregation choose not to follow the CDC and Presidential directives, your vestries should consult with your chancellors and legal counsel. There could be serious legal consequences for your parish if you do not comply. God forbid, but should you not follow the instructions, members of your congregation contract COVID-19 from one another, and spread the virus to others, they might become subject to civil action. No one should want to take this chance.

In conclusion as someone has said, "Feed your faith and not your fears." Use this time of limited quarantine to utilize the online ways of worship, to pray, to read your Bibles, to spend time with your families, and to wait in patient faith for the crisis to lift. It will eventually get better. We will get past this. The early Christians in the Roman Empire faced similar situations and ways to spread the Gospel in the midst of plague (see the following excellent article: <https://pjmedia.com/lifestyle/how-early-christians-saved-lives-and-spread-the-gospel-during-roman-plagues/>). Please be assured of my prayers and attentiveness to your needs. Our God is Sovereign. He will prevail! May the Lord bless and keep you through these challenging times!

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+Ray R. Sutton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

The Most Rev. Ray R. Sutton, Ph.D.
Presiding Bishop