



Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts

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Pastoral Guidance for COVID-19 Response

March 12, 2020

Dear Colleagues in the Diocese of Massachusetts,

The circumstances surrounding COVID-19 and our response continue to evolve rapidly. I know that you are all doing your utmost to make decisions in your local settings, and I am deeply grateful. This morning the response advisory group has convened and given me their best wisdom, on the basis of which I am writing with guidelines and counsel further to [yesterday's communique](#).

In all of this we face dilemmas of incomplete epidemiological information and varying pastoral imperatives that do not always point clearly in a single direction. God invites us to respond as fully as we can, with the best information we have, with both patience and timely determination, and with hearts full of compassion and concern for the most vulnerable in our midst.

- 1. I support the decision of any clergy (or wardens-in-charge) who choose to suspend worship and/or other activities at this time.** Our local contexts vary widely. We differ in the size and demographic populations of a congregation; the guidance of local community health organizations; essential community ministries conducted by a congregation; church architecture; parish resources to assure the carrying out of safety guidelines; and much more. Local leaders should understand themselves completely authorized to make this decision on the basis of their context, and though not mandating closure at this time, I support a decision to close made by any congregation's leaders.
- 2. Those in high-risk groups are urged to avoid all large group gatherings, including worship.** Health officials have identified the following persons as facing particular risk from the COVID-19 virus: persons age 60 or older; anyone with a respiratory condition such as asthma or emphysema; anyone with an autoimmune disorder; anyone with heart disease or diabetes; anyone currently or recently undergoing chemotherapy; and smokers. Those in these groups should remain apart from large group gatherings, including worship.
- 3. The immediate suspension of all other activities such as church school classes, coffee hours, etc., is strongly recommended.** Christian formation

resources which can be distributed for home use, or virtual gatherings for study and mutual support are encouraged.

4. **Churches which do hold services of public worship must adhere scrupulously** to the detailed safety guidelines issued yesterday.
5. **Group and committee meetings** should be postponed, rescheduled or conducted by Zoom or other electronic means, unless an in-person meeting is absolutely necessary.
6. **Parish staff members** whose position does not require them to be on site at the church should be encouraged to work at home.
7. **Any church in a community in which health officials have identified a heightened concern** by virtue of a confirmed diagnosis; or in which public schools have closed; or whose church membership includes those who have attended such events known to have been affected, such as the Biogen or CEEP conferences, should exercise an abundance of caution in their decision to close.
8. **Those not in high risk groups who have been asymptomatic for the past two weeks are urged to step up** to help assure that parish and community ministries which provide life-sustaining assistance to others can continue! Shelter ministries, food programs, recovery groups and many others will be without key volunteers for a time, and will rely on help from those who can manifest the concern of the church to keep them going.
9. **All are urged to support fellow parishioners and neighbors in high risk groups**, enabling them to stay safe in this time, and to **support your church**. Phone calls, errands, meals delivered and other ways to support anyone practicing self-quarantine will embody Christian compassion. Your continued financial support of your church will also be absolutely essential to maintaining all of our programs, ministries and life together in the weeks and months ahead.
10. **Alternative opportunities are available for worship**, for those in congregations suspending their services or for those observing their own cautionary social distancing. We are all encouraged, even obligated, to offer our prayers and worship especially in such moments. A growing list of congregations live-streaming and podcasting services is available [here](#). Additionally, a tutorial on streaming via Facebook Live is offered by St. Anne's-in-the-Fields Church in Lincoln [here](#).

As new information and guidance continues apace, this will doubtless not be my last communication with you. During this rapidly changing situation, it is wise to be preparing for further disruptions, including the possibility of mandatory closures in our communities. I am grateful for the now-expanded advisory group of epidemiologists and crisis responders who continue to share with me their wisdom. Let us all pray for one another in these times, that God's Spirit will lead us unfailingly and strengthen us constantly.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

The Rt. Rev. Alan M. Gates