



Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador

The Anglican Church of Canada

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Dear Friends,

I write for the fourth time in two weeks to continue a conversation launched in some alarm on March 12 as the reality of the Covid-19 Pandemic began to be felt in our province and in our church. Events continue to move at a frightening speed and my advice and directions to the Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador just days ago have been displaced by a rapidly evolving emergency. I won't review what I have written previously, neither do I need to go over the immense changes imposed upon our lives of late, but it is important for us to note that the Coronavirus is now among us. A state of medical emergency has led to sweeping restrictions upon life in this province in order to protect us all. I never expected to see in my lifetime the world in which I now find myself: public buildings and streets are deserted, freedom to gather is suspended, and physical isolation from our family members and neighbours is the rule.

In the midst of such disruption, I am astonished by how rapidly people are adapting and responding with good sense and compassion. Stories from across Newfoundland and Labrador that are shared on social media are inspiring and hopeful and speak well of us. Within our church, I read of fresh ways that our clergy and other leaders are holding together our communities, developing new pathways of ministry, and enhancing relationships to one another through the use of old technology like the telephone, or newer technology like the internet. Ironically, the more physically isolated we become from each other, the closer we seem to become emotionally and spiritually.

Our clergy are discovering profound ways of caring for individuals and families in need and are already adapting their pastoral care around bereavement and funerals. In some cases, a simple interment is taking place at the graveside with the promise of a more complete funeral when the time is right. In other cases, where cremation is an option, families are opting to wait completely until a later date. Our hospital and institutional chaplains, Canon Ed Keeping, Canon Iliffe Sheppard, Reverend David Pilling and Reverend Christopher Fowler have been faithful in the midst of adversity in their pastoral care to those in greatest need. Weddings and baptisms are being rescheduled and everywhere I look there are online prayers and services every day.

As I monitor life in our diocese and talk with clergy and others this week there are a number of concerns that have been identified that we are working on. Among those concerns is the proper use of technology and the challenge of equipping our leaders to take full advantage of the tools available to them. I am very pleased that those among us who are more "tech savvy" are willing to give advice and offer assistance to those among us who are less skilled in digital media. Thank you! We are also exploring options regarding copyright law as it affects the use of music and other worship resources for the purpose of online sharing and streaming.

With such a quickly changing situation, it is necessary for our diocese to also adapt in its administration and management. We must ensure that our clergy and people are cared for and protected and essential diocesan

services must be maintained. To that end, the Diocesan Executive Committee has put in place a smaller “*Ad Hoc* Committee” to respond swiftly to challenges as they emerge. This temporary committee will meet online frequently and oversee our diocese between meetings of the Executive Committee until the pandemic is over. I will chair the committee and the members are: Archdeacon Sam Rose, Canon Brad Wicks (Chancellor), Archdeacon Charlene Taylor, Mr. Fred Dinham (Finance Officer), the Reverend Christopher Fowler (Secretary), and Mrs. Debbie Pantin. The first order of business on Thursday of this week was to finalize a “Payroll Support Plan” to ensure that our clergy and employees continue to receive their income and all possible administrative and financial assistance is made available to our parishes.

I am delighted that so many of our parishes and congregations are now livestreaming daily offices and prayers along with more comprehensive worship on Sundays. I ask that these efforts continue and that they be enhanced in the days ahead. I will be leading worship from our Cathedral on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday and these services will be streamed live. I do not intend for these diocesan services to replace what each parish is doing locally, and they are intended only to augment what is already happening. They may be viewed live or later in the day on our diocesan Facebook site.

As I monitor the unfolding response to the Covid-19 Pandemic across our church, across our nation, and around the world, I have very reluctantly concluded that it is time for us to suspend the sharing of bread and wine in the Eucharistic Feast. This is consistent with what is happening in many dioceses right now and has been described by many as “Feasting on the Word and Fasting on the Eucharist.” I am heartbroken to take this decision but feel it is best for all until the outbreak is behind us. I paraphrase from the wise words of Archdeacon Sam who expressed it to me, more or less this way: “we need each other together physically to become the Body of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. We fast now separately so we can feast in the future together ... a foretaste of that Heavenly Banquet where there is no sickness, no illness, no COVID-19!” The Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, Archbishop Linda Nicholls, has commended to our consideration a reflection called, “On this Eucharistic Fast” by Dr. Eileen Scully, Director of Faith, Worship and Ministry. In part, Dr. Scully writes:

The present pandemic has, rather swiftly, thrust us into what seems to be the unknown. We know we need to do many, if not most, things in new ways, distancing physically and, for those with access to the technology, doing more connecting through digital platforms. Clergy and lay leaders are checking in on parishioners, meeting and holding bible studies by videoconference, and in other ways tending to the local communities in the Body of Christ. Many are offering spiritual leadership in the live-streaming of prayers and worship. As people are at home in isolation, the offering of audio-video prayers, especially when done from the home of the clergy or lay leader, has a way of helping to hallow those homes, which can for some start to feel like a prison. We are reminded that home is, can be, and ought to be, a place of prayer.

One of the most difficult realities that we face as worshipping communities is that suspension of gatherings for worship means the suspension of celebrations of the Holy Eucharist. Whereas musical and theatrical performances can be moved online, the Eucharist is not about performance by one for the many, and cannot move into that mode. The sacrament is made such in and through the gathering of people with a presider, in a place and time, in the physical presence of what we can touch and taste, together, as well as hear and see. And since the 1980s, we have become healthily attached to the celebration of the Lord’s Day, weekly, being about the eucharistic paschal mystery. For several generations, this has become the norm, and it is good that it is so. We have been blessed to be living in a time when celebration of the Holy Eucharist is not an ‘occasional celebration’ as it was for several centuries before us.

God is with us. Christ is truly, really, present with us, and the Holy Spirit surrounds us. Even when we cannot gather to make eucharist together we are not without the real presence of Christ in our very real, isolated, midst. Efforts to try to replace the community’s physical-and-

spiritual gathering with practices that try to offer a eucharistic communion online, though well-intentioned, do not reflect our sacramental theology, which is deeply about the physical-and-spiritual together.

Consonant with the most ancient Christian traditions is the practice of a eucharistic fast. In some contexts a fast from receiving communion is a choice – the very early church instructed catechumens (those undergoing formation in the faith prior to baptism) to fast from partaking of the eucharist. Many communities of disciples today know this experience of fast because they do not have weekly presence of a priest.

This is a time of context-necessary eucharistic fasting, in which we join with the whole communion of saints in longing for the bread of new life and the wine of the age to come.

From our baptismal and eucharistic identities shaped over time, we are equipped and challenged to be the real presence of Christ to each other. The world needs that presence always. We are reminded that sacramentality itself – the awareness of the reality of Christ’s true presence with us here and now and at all times - is broader than the specific celebrations of baptism and eucharist in which we have shared and will share. We are reminded that the Body of Christ – we disciples – is the sacrament to the world.

In closing, I thank everyone for their great faithfulness and dedication during this time. Be assured of my own prayers for you and your families. We are all in this together and ... as I stated in my sermon to the diocese on March 22, “This too shall pass.”

Let us hold firmly to our faith and to one another today and always.

With my every blessing,
+*Geoffrey*