

Pastoral Letter Regarding Covid-19 and its Impact on our Churches

August 29, 2020

Dear Family and Friends of the Diocese of Eau Claire,

After meeting through Zoom this week with the Corona Virus Task Force and the Leadership Council of Standing Committee and Executive Council, I have an update regarding our Diocese as we try to provide continued guidance for effective response to Covid-19.

The guidelines that we have been using through the summer remain in effect. The decision to open Church buildings for worship or to keep them closed should be made by clergy, wardens, and vestries. If you are open for worship masks are worn, physical distancing respected, and surfaces kept clean. If possible, worship outside. Whether open or not, continue to provide electronic means for people not present to worship. Also, if your building is open for worship, encourage those most at risk of serious illness from Covid-19 to stay at home.

Each week check the data of Covid-19 cases in your county. This is especially important for the upcoming month of September when public schools and colleges reopen. The statistics for the latter part of September are especially important. September is clearly a transitional month in terms of human activity and weather. What we will learn could have a bearing on parish decisions to be opened or closed. I advise you to talk with county school officials and health department members regarding the trends in your area. If a public school system is shutting down, it should factor into your decision as a congregation.

As you are able, keep in contact with those who are shut ins or because of technology or other reasons have lost connection to your parish. An in-person visit by clergy or other parish member while maintaining social distancing is best. It may be that the person will only permit a phone call. The point is to make the effort to reach out to them because it shows that you care.

If your building is open for worship, and you are celebrating the Holy Eucharist, try to make the service short. The time of exposure to Covid is a factor in spreading the disease. While the Gospel is to be read at each Eucharist, the other two readings could be eliminated. The Peace can be shared without moving about. A nod of the head or a wave of the hand is sufficient greeting. The Offering Plate should not be passed. Place it on a stand in the back of the Church and bring it forward during the offertory.

Before the service have the altar prepared with the elements ready. The celebrant should be the only person receiving wine. Once people have received bread, move the elements into the sacristy. Ablutions can be done there after the service. Unless the celebrant wants to chant through a mask, I recommend the service be spoken. If you want music from an organ or other instrument, provide that offering as a prelude and/or postlude in the service. I do not recommend hosting a coffee hour or fellowship time until the threat of the virus passes. If you feel an occasion demands this, try to have it outdoors.

The Covid-19 pandemic is a factor of science, but in social terms it is linked to other important matters. Corona virus, racial injustice, the economy, and destructive weather are combining to provide stress and upset for our nation. The economic disruption and consequent unemployment caused by Covid-19 have many individuals and families wondering how they will survive financially. If this weren't enough we have the added tensions of what is

becoming a bitter political season as we enter the final weeks of campaigning before electing or re-electing a president on November 3.

Into this toxic mix is the apparently needless shooting of Jacob Blake by Kenosha police. This prompted an at first peaceful protest by many followed by arson, looting, and rioting caused by an unlawful few. On Wednesday night a teen vigilante murdered two people and critically injured a third. A part of me wants to cry out and say, "When is enough enough?" People of color are exhausted from being afraid every time they see a police car. Now when they try to tell the larger community their plight by peaceful protest, a new fear is added of being gunned down by self-appointed executioners.

More and more African-Americans are emigrating from the United States. In this way they can finally be free from having their humanity always defined by race and the oppressive awareness that they might be in the wrong place at the wrong time, accused of anything, and imprisoned or killed for it. This is a national problem, and it is a white problem. I am white. I have to own up to the truth that doing nothing is insufficient. Racism in any form is contrary to living out Jesus' teachings in the Gospels. Like it or not, how we deal with issues of race is a deeply Christian concern. It is part of personal salvation.

We see the phrase, "Black Lives Matter" and then hear the counter of, "All Lives Matter." Does this response help the plight of African-Americans? How would you feel if in grieving the death of your child, someone told you, "We have to grieve the deaths of all children?" As African-Americans cry out will we help with balm or add more salt to their wounds? Sometimes balm for people of color soothes in the form of dry humor. On Friday Jacob Blake's father compared racial injustice to rush hour car traffic. He said, "I want to get in the white folks lane. I've already got my turn signal on."

Our nation desperately needs spiritual guidance and care. Worship, pastoral support, and prayers of both listening and intercession are all critical in this unhappy time. As we go through our week by week routines, there is a tendency to minimize and dismiss the importance of the Church and our individual and communal life with God. Instead, right now, the opposite is true. The Church and our faith are more important than ever. We need to understand and embrace this central truth. In doing so we can trust that God will guide us and others to find new solutions to old problems and a renewed awareness that this earth is God's planet. Let's trust God to show us how to do things right and then give us the strength to act appropriately. With my love and best wishes, I remain,

Your brother in Christ,



William Jay Lambert
VI Bishop of Eau Claire