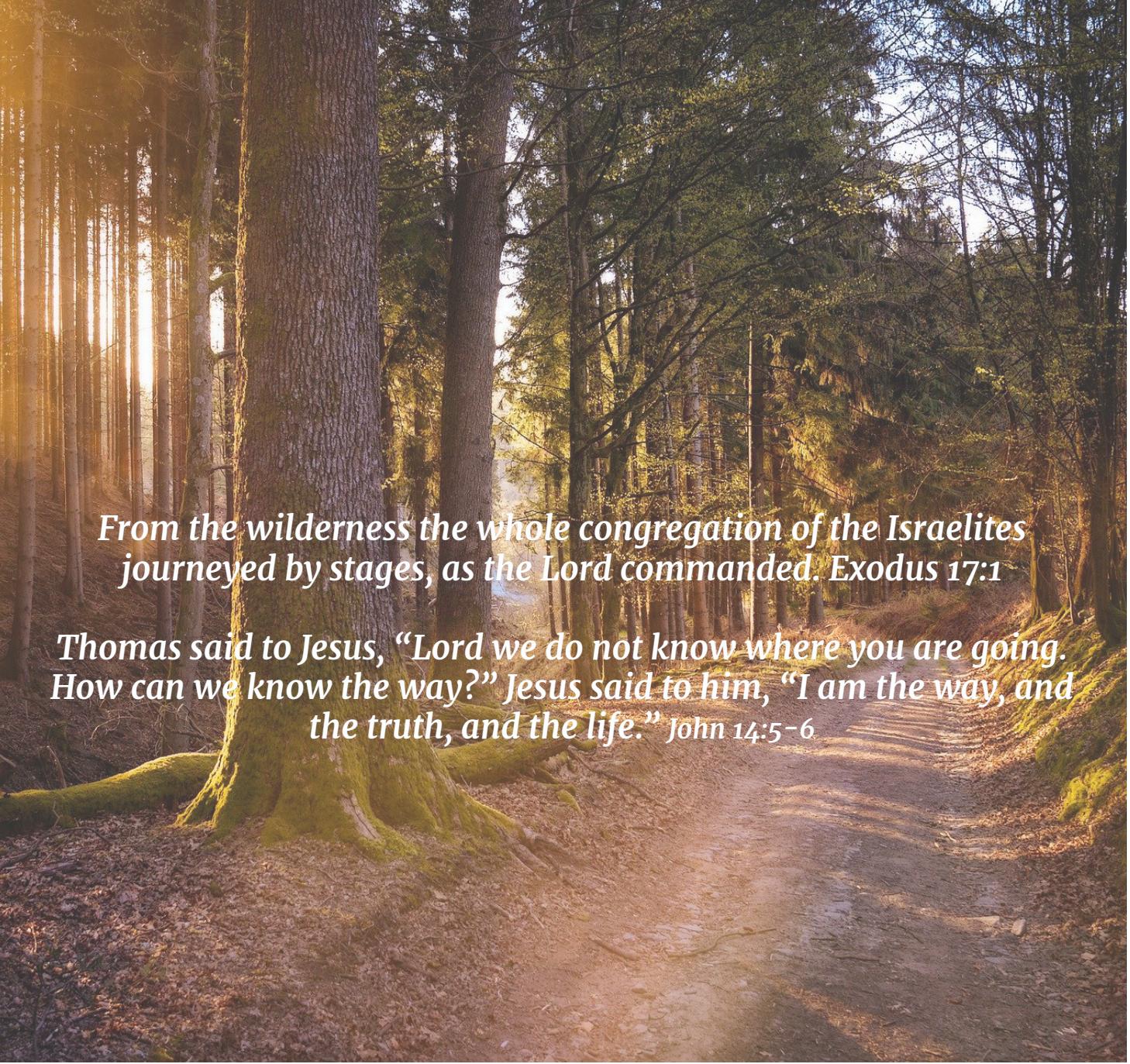


A Phased Approach to Regathering as Church

Turning Toward the Future with Caution and Hope

From the Episcopal Bishops of Maryland, Washington, DC and Virginia

May 4, 2020



From the wilderness the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. Exodus 17:1

Thomas said to Jesus, “Lord we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” John 14:5-6

In the first weeks of societal efforts to contain the novel coronavirus' spread, we had all hoped that the most restrictive measures of social distancing and closure of non-essential business would be effective and brief. Yet in our region--that of Washington, DC, Maryland, and Virginia--both the number of lives lost and the economic impact of containment efforts continue to rise and there is, as yet, no clear end in sight.

Thus we continue to live in a suspended time of suffering and loss. Yet with quiet amazement, we're discovering within ourselves and in our virtual communities untapped reserves of resilience and creativity. We're heartened daily by acts of generosity and kindness and inspired by those whose quiet heroism helps to save lives and care for the most vulnerable.

People of faith are not immune to human suffering, nor are we spared anxiety or grief. What we can do, and are doing, is to draw upon the deepest wells of our biblical and theological traditions which sustain us in times like this. Like our ancestors who walked through their own valleys of the shadow of death, we call upon our God for guidance and strength. As followers of Jesus, we make our way trusting in His abiding presence and love, while we take our place among all God's children in this uncertain time.

Since early March, our churches have responded to the abrupt end to public worship and community gatherings with creativity, goodwill, and compassion for those hardest hit by the pandemic. As your bishops, we have seen that in the midst of your own grief and disorientation you, clergy and laypersons alike, have been a calming presence for others; in your own suffering, you have offered the solace of heartfelt prayer and solidarity with others in their hour of need. Words cannot express our gratitude.

Our elected officials are beginning to make plans for gradual, phased reopening of non-essential business and easing of social distancing.

Governors Hogan and Northam and Mayor Bowser have pledged to coordinate their efforts, and we, the bishops of Washington, DC, Maryland, and Virginia are committed to do the same, as we begin to plan for a gradual re-gathering of our congregations.

The hard truth is that we will not be able to welcome all people into our places of worship for the foreseeable future. Thus we must prepare for different stages of regathering, following the guidelines of civic leaders. Moreover, the process of regathering may not be uniform, but vary according to county or region, and we must also prepare for the possibility of suspending in-person gatherings again should cases of infection rise.

Our churches have responded to the abrupt end to public worship and community gatherings with creativity, goodwill, and compassion... now we must prepare ourselves for different stages of regathering.

As the Wisconsin Council of Churches recently wrote to its member congregations,

"What future we find ourselves in depends not only on the behavior of the virus, but on the actions of people--as individuals, churches, communities, and governments. The way forward will not be a matter of following a timetable, but of faithfully discerning the signs of the times, and responding accordingly."

The way forward is also the road of our own transformation, in the midst of a societal transformation that we can help shape by our faithfulness to the God of resurrection and hope. God is calling forth from us now far more than we could have asked for or imagined just a few months ago. If we choose to embrace this moment and learn all that we can from it, we will emerge as a stronger church, with greater capacity for faithful and fruitful ministry when this season passes.

What follows is a description of both the phased regathering of our churches and a parallel discernment of God's call to us in this crucible time.

Levels of the Opening of Church Buildings for Worship in Response to a Public Health Emergency

PHASE ONE

No Live In-Person Gatherings
(Stay-at-Home/Most Businesses and
Institutions Closed)

CHURCH PROTOCOLS UNDER PHASE ONE

Congregations holding virtual worship,
livestreamed or recorded

Bible studies, coffee hours, social gatherings,
and meetings via telephone or online

Pastoral care via telephone or online

Continued ministries of service and
compassion within protocols of safety

First assessments of economic impact on
members of the congregations and wider
community--preliminary adjustments of
budgets, ministry goals

PUBLIC HEALTH INDICATOR FOR PHASE ONE

COVID-19 CASES,
HOSPITALIZATIONS AND DEATHS
ARE INCREASING

PHASE TWO

Significantly Limited Gatherings
(Some Businesses and Institutions
Reopened with Limitations)

CHURCH PROTOCOLS UNDER PHASE TWO

**Note: All regatherings require bishop's
advance approval of the congregation's plan*

Church offices may reopen in spaces
large enough for physical distance to be
maintained, with the requirement that
proper sanitation measures be strictly
adhered to and enforced

Small indoor church worship (under 50 or
number designated by civic authorities)
may re-start in spaces large enough for 6
feet of physical distance to be maintained
between people

Outdoor worship for limited numbers with
physical distancing

Restrictive practices for celebrations of the
Eucharist

Small group gatherings permitted with
physical distancing

Continued health/safety protocols,
including the use of masks at all gatherings.

Ongoing care for the most vulnerable, engagement with those assessing the societal impact of the pandemic and advocacy for justice

Next level assessment of pandemic's impact on members of the congregation and community. Forecasting of necessary long-term adjustments of ministry initiatives. Exploration of collaborative partnerships

Virtual worship will still be necessary in all congregations to accommodate vulnerable populations and larger worshipping communities

Pastoral care to those in high-risk categories for contracting the virus remains restricted, particularly for clergy and lay visitors in high-risk categories

PUBLIC HEALTH INDICATORS FOR PHASE TWO

14-DAY CONSECUTIVE DECLINE IN NUMBERS OF PEOPLE TESTING POSITIVE FOR COVID-19, HOSPITALIZATIONS, AND INTENSIVE CARE BED USE

WIDESPREAD TESTING / CONTACT TRACING AVAILABLE TO TRACK THE SPREAD OF THE VIRUS

SUFFICIENT SUPPLY OF PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT

EVIDENCE THAT OUR HEALTH CARE SYSTEMS HAVE SUFFICIENT EQUIPMENT AND ARE NOT OVERWHELMED BY THE NUMBER OF CASES

PHASE THREE

Moderately Limited Gatherings
(More Businesses and Institutions Reopened / Fewer Restrictions)

CHURCH PROTOCOLS WITH GUIDELINES UNDER PHASE THREE

Increased number of persons allowed for public worship, according to guidelines set by health officials

Continued physical distancing and masking requirements likely

Restrictive practices may still guide the celebration of Eucharist, with gradual easing

Restrictions eased on office/classroom gathering, within guidelines

Larger group ministries (youth groups, camps, classes) may resume within established guidelines

Continued assessments of pandemic impact and prayerful discernment of future ministry

PUBLIC HEALTH INDICATORS FOR PHASE THREE

COVID-19 CASES, HOSPITALIZATIONS AND DEATHS HAVE FALLEN TO NEAR ZERO

WIDESPREAD TESTING AND TRACKING

HEALTH CARE SYSTEM WELL EQUIPPED AND ABLE TO TREAT ALL IN NEED

PHASE FOUR

Unlimited Gatherings with Some Protections
(All or Most Physical Restrictions Lifted)

CHURCH PROTOCOLS WITH GUIDELINES UNDER PHASE FOUR

No limit to the number of worshipers who may attend, except that those who are known to be infectious, actively sick or who display any of the symptoms of being ill should not attend

Worshipers may wear masks throughout the service but masks will not be required

Sacramental worship and community gathering restrictions are lifted

PUBLIC HEALTH INDICATORS FOR PHASE FOUR

A VACCINE HAS BEEN DEVELOPED AND IS AVAILABLE TO ALL IN THE GENERAL PUBLIC

TREATMENT OF PROVEN EFFECTIVENESS IS WIDELY AVAILABLE

TESTING IS WIDESPREAD FOR VIRUS AND IMMUNITY

LIFE AFTER COVID-19: CONTINUED ADAPTATION TO NEW REALITY

The process of reflection and adaptation has already begun. We place our hope in Christ, whose resurrection assures us that on the other side of death, there is life.

POST COVID-19 CHURCH INCREASED MISSION CAPACITY

Both in-person and virtual worship

Both in-person and virtual meetings

Increased engagement in small group gatherings and widespread pastoral care

Increased online giving as well as in-person offerings

Fruitful collaborative endeavors

Right-sizing of building use and capacities to meet a growing mission field

Streamlined, efficient use of financial and other resources

Strategic efforts toward the realization of key strategic mission, vision and goals

Emergency preparedness plans and strategies in place

Each diocese will develop specific strategies and checklists for its unique situations.

The Right Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington

The Right Rev. Susan Goff, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia

The Right Rev. Eugene Taylor Sutton, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland