



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP OF NIAGARA

Anglican Church of Canada

TO THE CLERGY, LICENSED LAY WORKERS & WARDENS OF THE DIOCESE

June 10, 2020

Dear friends,

You have heard by now I'm sure, that the Province of Ontario intends to ease some of their Emergency Orders, as of Friday. These changes now include the churches. And while that is good news, it does not reduce the complexity of the situation. Just as our response to this pandemic in its early - and crisis stages - unfolded and changed day by day, so now are our responses to a very cautious re-opening. It is crucial that as well as erring on the side of caution in our determinations, we are also nimble in our ability to pivot to the situation as it unfolds.

On the best medical advice, [the House of Bishops issued a letter last Monday](#) to invite people to rest from the expectation of a return to our buildings during the summer months. Our intention was - while continuing to offer online services of worship as per our new normal - to give support to our leaders to take their much-needed vacation. Many had opined that they felt unable to do so up until that point and so we wanted to signal the importance of rest for leaders who have given so much in these months of crisis and resultant adaptation. We had also signalled that would furnish us with much-needed time to plan for the fall without the expectation of an imminent return to Sunday worship during the summer months. These are important things to hold in our minds as we move forward. As public health authorities signal to us that we should be engaged in second wave preparedness, we are aware that the year ahead may be challenging with oscillations between times of restriction and easing.

This is all to say that because of the continuing Emergency Declaration, and its possible extension into July, we were reasonably assured of the wisdom of making the determination to keep our buildings closed "for in-person worship until at least September."

And then came yesterday's decision by the Province to allow places of worship to hold services for up to 30% of their building's capacity - and to allow, in Stage 2, social gatherings of 10 people at funerals and weddings. This announcement has the potential to change things significantly.

But here's the thing: just because it seems we *can* return to our buildings in reduced capacity, does not mean that we *should*. The health and safety of our people, especially those most vulnerable to severe impacts from this coronavirus, has been uppermost in our concerns and has been at the centre of every step in our decision-making process. We have been and will continue to be committed to a cautious and gradual return to Sunday worship in our buildings in the fall.

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We'll be monitoring the public health indicators in our diocese closely in the coming days and weeks and will move forward as a whole diocese when all parts are able to enter Stage 2 of the provincial re-opening process. We're not yet there.

This liminal time will also affect how we approach matters such as celebrations of the Eucharist. Up until now we have been observing a eucharistic fast with the rest of the Province. However, what we might have committed to in the early days of this pandemic crisis is different to how we envision continuing through it in the months ahead. For some weeks now I have been consulting about this matter.

As our Primate, [Archbishop Linda Nicholls, noted in a message to the Church last week](#), there are many views on how best to move forward,

“...many are holding a eucharistic fast until we can gather again. Others are advocating, some very strongly, for a change in eucharistic practice to allow some form of ‘home eucharist’ during online worship. Others have spoken about the longstanding practice of ‘spiritual communion’.”

Central to our faith, the Primate has indicated that we will begin a work of discernment about our eucharistic theology. As this discussion is underway, virtual communion, involving a remote consecration of the elements of the Eucharist will not be permitted.

However, while we wait upon the decision of the mind of the whole Church in such a weighty matter, I have decided to authorize the celebration of the Eucharist for spiritual communion during online worship services with clear guidelines and rubrics to be observed by those who choose to proceed.

Specifically, in terms of parishioners' participation in online services, at the time of reception of the bread and wine a selection of prayers for spiritual reception will be authorized for use for those joining worship from home. These prayers - and guidelines - will be provided in the coming days.

In addition, I'll be holding a special online celebration of the Eucharist with spiritual communion next Wednesday evening at 7:00pm from our cathedral to signal the beginning of this practice. Clergy can then begin to celebrate a full Eucharist with spiritual communion for online services under these circumstances on the Sunday following, June 21st.

However, I hasten to add, that in no way are any priests compelled to celebrate the Eucharist if it does not meet the ministry context they are in at the present moment. It is entirely acceptable to continue to feast on the Word until we are able to safely gather in person in greater numbers.

Some closing thoughts:

As leaders in our diocese, you will know that we continue to navigate an unprecedented time which will continue to require consultation, discernment, hard decisions, and a great deal of complexity as we try at all stages to safeguard our people and the communities we serve.

All of that being so, I would ask two things of you: first, I ask for your patience - with our diocesan leaders and staff, with your parishioners, with each other, and with yourselves as we navigate the path forward with prudence and abundant care. The law of averages says that we will get some things wrong. I ask that we accord each other some grace for this time. Of one thing I am sure, we are all doing our best to rise to these demanding events, striving to live the law of love in all things.

And the second thing that I ask is that you willingly comply with the guidelines as set out at every stage. They are for the health and safety of all concerned and to ensure that we move forward together.

So much of how we approach this next phase of the pandemic will determine our success at preventing any outbreaks of COVID-19 in our parishes. We will proceed as carefully and as methodically as we are able.

Let me end with a profound thank you for all of your intentions and efforts to care for our Church: both the people and the containers for ministry that are our buildings. We have many miles to travel together before we are through, but I am confident that a united approach will be key in the months ahead.

Blessings to you all.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Susan Niagara". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bishop of Niagara