

As the World and the Church Re-Gathers

A message from The Rt. Rev. Susan B. Haynes

Bishop of Southern Virginia

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Yesterday, Gov. Ralph Northam announced that at the end of the day on May 14, he will begin to ease the “stay-at-home” restrictions that have governed our lives over the past several weeks. On May 15, he will allow the re-opening of some non-essential businesses such as gyms and hair salons, as well as limited worship gatherings of 10 or fewer people. The purpose of this easing is to see if we can re-enter the world in a cautious enough way so as to continue the flattening of the curve with respect to the pandemic of Covid-19. In other words, the restrictions are eased “for the sake of observing the metrics.” If the metrics support these actions, then we will know if it is okay to enter Phase 1 of re-opening our state. If the metrics do not support these actions, we will have to adapt.

While all of us are eager to get back to church as we have known it, Phase 1 itself will allow only for gatherings limited to 10 people or fewer. Phase 2, when it begins, will lift the limit on the number of people gradually. Even then, guidelines regarding sanitization and social distancing will remain in place and require enforcement. ***Things will definitely be different.*** What this means for churches is that beginning May 15, there will not be an appreciable shift in what we do as Episcopalians. That is to say, my existing guidance remains in place. So long as the number present does not exceed 10, personnel may go to our church buildings to livestream/record worship. Staff may go to offices to conduct business in numbers of 10 or fewer with social distancing. The Sacrament may be taken to homes where people are ill. Outdoor gatherings not exceeding 10 people may proceed with requisite social distancing. This, of course, is a far cry from what we were once used to.

Many have asked for clear guidelines about how to “re-gather” church. Toward that end, I have assembled a panel of clergy, health professionals, mental health professionals, musicians and formation directors who will

spend the next couple of weeks helping me to formulate clear guidelines by the end of the month as to how to re-gather the church safely. By that time, we should have a clearer picture as to how we can proceed safely.

You will recall that many health professionals, and even our governor, have said that we will not be able to move forward safely until we have gone 14 straight days with a decreased number of new cases and deaths in the State of Virginia. So far we have [not achieved that metric](#). Consequently, a full-scale opening, even a limited scale opening, is not indicated at this point. Indeed, it would be profoundly unwise and would hazard the health of the weakest among us and put at risk the health of others.

I am sympathetically aware of the urgency that some of you have expressed regarding your desire to begin gathering again. I am feeling somewhat impatient, as well. Yet in Presiding Bishop Michael Curry's April 29 [Word to the Church](#), he wisely exhorts us to ask the question time and again, "What would Love do?" As we approach the re-gathering of our church, let us be mindful of the way of love, of the way of making room for one another, of the way of being the Church. And rest assured, that God is with us as we do.

As events unfold and the possibility of re-gathering emerges, I look forward to providing you with new guidance "for the living of these days" and for each to come.

Yours faithfully in Christ,
Bishop Susan