Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

With every passing day, new developments emerge revealing the true severity of the Covid-19 pandemic, and in response to the mounting threat, governments at all levels have imposed increasing restrictions, from the closure of schools to restaurants and bars and salons.  Every new guideline and requirement has been designed to slow the spread of the virus, to flatten and extend the curve of infections, so that our medical system will not be overwhelmed and faced with the horrific burden of choosing who will receive potentially life-saving treatment, and who will not.  St. Luke’s has made choices on the basis of the best medical evidence and epidemiological projections available, promoting social distancing through the cessation of all public gatherings, including worship.  None of these decisions have been taken lightly by those who bear the mantle of leadership.

Up until this point, Bishop White has “STRONGLY RECOMMENDED” (caps in the original) that congregations under his care take specific sensible actions that promote the well-being of all people, especially the most vulnerable in our communities.  However, as the Covid-19 crisis reaches a critical point, Bishop White has issued a Pastoral Directive, the ecclesiastical equivalent of a military order, that all congregations cease gatherings, including worship, until further notice.  I agree with his motives, his reasoning, and his conclusions 100%.

We need to be realistic about what “until further notice” means.  The situation is fluid, the course of the pandemic unpredictable.  But based on the recommendations of the CDC that groups of 50 people or more abstain from gathering over the next eight weeks, we are looking at a closure of St. Luke’s that will extend for months.  Among other things, we will not be able to gather for worship during Holy Week or for Easter Day, though we have been given a dispensation to celebrate Easter Day once it is safe for us to gather again in worship.  I share in your disappointment, about what we’ve missed and will miss.  I, too, feel a sense of isolation and frustration.  It is a surreal time to serve as a priest, the most disorienting period of my 22 years in holy orders.  But I am not discouraged, nor am I afraid.

A virus, no matter how vicious, cannot change who we are – a faithful, hopeful, patient, kind, resilient, and adaptive people of God.  In its long history, the Church has weathered worse, yet here we are, and we will not stand idly by.  We shall abide in the peace of Jesus.  We shall endure.  And with the help of technology, we will find ways of being together that will keep us connected, perhaps not in the face-to-face way we prefer, but in a way that’s sufficient until the storm subsides.

First, we will continue to pre-record worship and put it online in an easily accessible format.

Second, Mother Allison has opened an account for the parish with Zoom, an inexpensive but effective audio-visual teleconferencing app, which has served the diocesan clergy well in our frequent meetings these past few weeks.  It’s easy to use, and we will provide a link with specific instructions in the days to come. I believe this tool will enable most if not all of our small groups to resume meeting: the Tuesday night Centering Prayer Group, Wednesday morning Bible study, our monthly Wednesday night Book Club, the Thursday night Bible study, the monthly Thursday night Young Adult event, and monthly DOK and BOSA meetings.  I would encourage our musical ensembles, the Choir and Reflections, to use this tool, too.  I doubt the platform will support rehearsal, but you can enjoy each other’s company.

Third, we will be livestreaming the offices of morning and evening prayer on our parish Facebook page weekdays at 9:00am and 6:00pm, respectively.  These are more informal opportunities for us to connect through the prayers of our great Anglican heritage.

Fourth, the clergy will be online at specific dates and times during the week, sort of like how college professors keep office hours, for informal conversations to discuss whatever might be on our minds and hearts.

Our ability to be pastorally present face-to-face, for both clergy and lay pastors, will likely be constrained even further as time goes by.  Right now, even clergy cannot visit people in hospitals or rehabilitation and assisting living facilities, except in cases of extreme emergency, but we are looking at how we can be present with one another virtually that can offer comfort and meaning.

If you’ve lost your job or lost income because of reduced hours, tips, or commissions, or because your business has dried up, and you need financial help for rent, utilities, food, etc., the Church has resources available to help meet your needs.  It’s very discrete.  Renounce any embarrassment or shame you might feel.  Covid-19 is not your fault.  It’s a force of nature.  Simply contact Mother Allison or me.  We’ll take care of it to the best of our ability.

It is essential through all of this that we offer the world a witness to the Risen Christ.  If we seek God’s grace, we need not panic.  Know that you made a wise choice to become part of a loving and supportive community.  We’re here to help.  We all need to exercise a solid discipline of prayer for those affected by this disease: those who contract it, their loved ones, people whose livelihoods are under threat or have already been compromised.  We need to pray for our elected leaders, political and ecclesiastical.  Lots of us have more discretionary time on our hands, and perhaps have already become bored.  Use that time wisely.  This is a great chance for a fresh start in cultivating healthy habits like regular prayer and exercise.

Finally, once this is over, and we can gather again, I think we’ll be much stronger for it.  We’ll be less likely to take for granted the many blessings we receive from being part of Christ’s Body.  We’ll appreciate and enjoy opportunities for worship, fellowship, and formation more than ever.   We’ll be a more technologically competent parish, an asset that will continue to serve us and God long after the last case of Covid-19 has been diagnosed and treated.  And somehow, in the paradox that is life, our being kept apart will sew us together more closely.

Oh, and we will have the most magnificent experience of worship, coupled with a party of truly epic proportions, the stuff of legends.

Peace,

Father Michael