



THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF MONTANA

THE RT. REV. MARTY STEBBINS, BISHOP

28 May 2020

Dear All,

In June 1st, the State of Montana will move to Phase II of the COVID-19 pandemic recovery. Here is part of the ethos of this state from our Governor:

“This Directive is the next step in Montana’s reopening, to Phase Two. I stress, however, that individual responsibility—such as good hygiene, frequent cleaning of highly-touched surfaces, and strict adherence to social distancing—remains Montana’s best tool in the fight against new infections. This Directive is not an invitation to forget the lessons that Montana has learned in its fight against COVID- 19 these past months. Rather, it is a framework to apply those lessons as we move toward a new normal. In so doing, we must continue to place a special emphasis on protecting those in Montana most vulnerable to complications from COVID-19. That crucial work demands a collective effort by all Montanans. By continuing to take these measures seriously, we protect our family, friends, and neighbors as Montana begins to emerge from its initial encounter with COVID-19.”

That being said, my requirements from Phase I for our Episcopal congregations and communities remain in place with the following modifications:

- The priest-in-charge (or Senior Warden if there is not priest) will make the final judgement call for any in-person gatherings on church grounds; that person has my full support of they believe it wise to delay public, in-person worship. The clergy are in communication with me.
- Congregations can meet in groups up to 50, provided the other Phase I safety protocols are followed, including physical distancing and sanitation. Masks must be worn over the nose and mouth, if 6-10ft of separation cannot be maintained while on the physical campus. Young children will have difficulty following the distance guidelines, so if there are young children in the congregation, WEAR A MASK.
- Masks **MUST** be worn over the nose and mouth if there is to be singing. No choirs may practice or gather at this point. Choir members must be distributed throughout the congregation and be masked. Special music with one or two singers must have a distance of at least 15 feet from any other person **AND** the physical environment must

be sanitized before other people enter the area. I strongly suggest that this be done by recording it outside of worship time and then posted online and/or played in the sanctuary. There is a possibility of a diocesan-wide singing ban if further research demonstrates its risk is too great.

- The county public health department must also concur with public, in-person worship.
- The congregation must comply with any additional requirements that the county public health department requires.
- No home communion may be given to any shut-ins by Lay Eucharistic Visitors. They are to be treated as high risk as those in assisted living and nursing homes. No visitors are allowed at those facilities until Montana's Phase III.
- Holy Eucharist may be celebrated, but the common cup may not yet be offered since its use would violate the physical distancing requirement. Distributing bread must be done with masks on since the physical distancing requirement would be violated. The priest-in-charge makes the final decision as to whether to offer Eucharist.
- Weddings and funerals may resume as long as the guidelines are met. The priest-in-charge has final say on whether this will happen in Phase II; they have my full support.
- Plans must be developed for Christian formation, Vacation Bible School, etc. that will keep the physical plant free of the virus and prevent children from passing the infection to one another and to adults. Young children are generally asymptomatic carriers, but please be aware that children have died of COVID-19 infections.
- Worship outdoors continues to be plausible, provided people can be spread out. Please be mindful of prevailing winds. When in doubt, wear a mask.

Please remember that congregations must continue to:

- The building areas being used must be sanitized before and after worship.
- Hand sanitizer must be readily available.
- No one may be on church property without a mask and be willing to wear it over the nose and mouth when requested by anyone.
- Attendance must continue to be taken in case contact tracing needs to be done to stop a rise in numbers of cases.
- Passing of the peace will be done without physical contact.
- Remind those who are vulnerable to severe disease that they should continue to worship remotely.
- Tell people that if they do not feel well or have a fever: they are to stay home!

Church Insurance has an exemption clause about communicable diseases. We are not covered by insurance should a person contract COVID on church property.

Some helpful resources:

The Governor's directive:

<https://covid19.mt.gov/Portals/223/Documents/Phase%20Two%20Directive%20with%20Appendices.pdf?ver=2020-05-19-145442-350>

Dr. Anthony Fauci's recent recommendations for churches:

<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/05/27/dr-anthony-fauci-catholic-churches-masks-communion-covid-coronavirus>

For a discussion on singing: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFI3GsVzj6Q&app=desktop>

This is really focused on choirs, practice and teaching. It does have application for congregational singing.

Current general CDC guidelines for churches: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/faith-based.html>

I will leave you with some wisdom from the Rev. Greg Brown, Holy Comforter, Charlotte, NC:

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Now concerning the wearing of masks, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that in the time before Covid, we were enticed and led astray thinking that we were not responsible for one another's health. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the spirit of love ever says 'masks be cursed!'; and no one can say 'masks are a really good idea for everybody!' except through a spirit of love.

Now there are varieties of masks, but the same spirit of wearing them; and there are varieties of mask wearers, but the same virus; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same precautions that must be shown to everyone.

To each is given a manifestation of a mask for the common good. To one a mask is given through our mask makers, and to another a purchased one online, or in a store according to the same spirit of protection. Some fashion one after watching a video on YouTube, to another... they already had some. The knowledge of needing to wear one according to the same spirit, to another faith that the same spirit will improve health and save lives.

Another receives the gifts of healing by this generous spirit, to another this seems no less than the working of a miracle, another prophesies that we'll get through all of this sooner by observing these loving precautions, to another the discernment of figuring out how all can get one, to another the knowledge that a mask hides all kinds of mouths and tongues, to another the understanding that those mouths and tongues are still there, behind those masks.

All these are activated by one and the same spirit, and we hope to allot to each one individually just as they choose.

In other words, wear a mask!...

Because loving our neighbor as ourselves is the crux of it. When we wear a mask we are saying that we love and care for ourselves, and that we love and care for our neighbors. If our neighbor is sick (and perhaps doesn't even know it yet) our masks help protect US. If WE are sick (and perhaps don't even know it yet) our masks help protect OUR NEIGHBOR...

... it is a tangible and visible manifestation and practice of our LOVE.

Peace and Light,

Bishop Marty