



EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN CONNECTICUT

PARTICIPATING IN GOD'S MISSION

ECCT Clergy and Lay Leaders Communication: COVID-19
Update # 4: March 21, 2020

Dear Clergy and Wardens in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut:

Grace to you and peace in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We write again, a mere 24 hours after our last update, with additional information regarding our common life as the Body of Christ living in the midst of COVID-19. The urgency of this update is necessitated by Governor Ned Lamont's Executive Order No. 7H released last night after our Update #3. In the Executive Order, Governor Lamont directs that "all businesses and not-for-profit entities in the state shall employ, to the maximum extent possible, any telecommuting or work from home procedures that they can safely employ. Non-essential businesses or not-for-profit entities shall reduce their in-person workforces at any workplace locations by 100% not later than March 23, 2020 at 8:00 pm." <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/Office-of-the-Governor/Executive-Orders/Lamont-Executive-Orders/Executive-Order-No-7H.pdf> While we think that the Governor's Executive Order is a prudent move to help suppress and mitigate the spread of COVID-19, it does raise questions about the conduct and operation of our parishes and worshipping communities in the Episcopal Church Connecticut at this time.

To help clarify how Executive Order 7H should be understood across ECCT, we have turned to our wise and faithful Chancellor (bishops' lawyer) Brad Babbitt for counsel and advice. With Brad's permission, we copy his thought here:

"The Governor of Connecticut issued Executive Order 7H on March 20, 2020. Among other things, the Order provides that all 'non-essential' businesses and not-for-profit entities in Connecticut 'shall employ, to the maximum extent possible, any telecommuting or work from home procedures that they can safely employ' starting March 23, 2020, until April 22, 2020, unless terminated earlier. The Order gives examples of what constitutes an essential business, including healthcare centers, gas stations, and grocery stores. Religious institutions are not expressly defined as essential businesses, although such institutions could be argued qualify as 'providers of basic necessities to economically disadvantaged populations.'

The Governor's authority to prevent the Church from holding services is limited by the First Amendment, which prohibits the federal and state governments from making any law that interferes with the free exercise of religion. At the



same time, courts generally defer to the executive branch's discretion in the midst of emergencies. Accordingly, while the precise parameters of the Order lack perfect clarity, and while the Order could be subject to challenge at some point in the future, it is reasonable to presume that courts would likely find the Order enforceable. For that reason, it seems prudent to analyze how the Order applies to conducting religious services.

Because religious institutions are not defined (expressly, at least) as 'essential' businesses, such institutions are required by the Order to employ work-from-home or telecommuting procedures 'to the maximum extent possible.' One could reasonably argue that having a priest go to a sanctuary to lead a web-cast service while everyone else stays away and watches from home satisfies that requirement. I believe that is particularly true if to do otherwise would mean that the service wouldn't occur or wouldn't be able to be streamed. Leading a service in that way would also be consistent with the intent underlying the Order assuming the leaders of the service does not take mass transit to get to the sanctuary and stays more than 6 feet away if they interact with any other person. Continuing to offer services led by priests observing social distancing from empty sanctuaries over the web appears to be consistent with the Governor's latest order."

Taking Brad's good counsel into consideration, we would strongly encourage clergy and lay leaders to take the following actions beginning Monday night, March 22, 2020 at 8:00 pm, if you have not done so already.

1. Close all offices in all parishes and worshipping communities of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut and direct all staff to work from home as much as is possible. (The Commons has been pursuing this policy for over a week now.)
2. Continue innovative ways to share regular worship in our parishes and worshipping communities using online technology. We believe there is pastoral value in streaming such services from familiar parish locations/sanctuaries and support clergy and lay readers in leading worship in one's local church. In all circumstances the directives to practice "physical distancing" and healthy and safe behaviors to avoid the spread of COVID-19 should be observed. To that end, worship should include no more than ten in-person leaders, standing six or more feet apart. Ideally such in-person worship leadership would be limited to one ordained person and one other facilitator/videographer/acolyte/reader, etc. as necessary.



3. Parishes and worshipping communities are urged to continue as much as possible, following “physical distancing” and healthy and safe behaviors to avoid the spread of COVID-19, their ministries with/to 12-step communities and those who are food and housing insecure. Such ministries are consistent with our vocation as disciples of Jesus sent as apostles to be about God’s mission in the world; and also in keeping with the Governor’s Order allowing for ‘providers of basic necessities to economically disadvantaged populations’ to continue to operate.

We will be available to discuss these recommendations and any other questions you might have about the Governor’s Executive Order No. 7H in our zoom call with the clergy and wardens of ECCT on Wednesday from 8:30-9:30 am. Details for the zoom call are posted on the ECCT website.

We are indeed living in unforeseen and difficult times with swift and changing circumstances in response to the coronavirus here in Connecticut. While so much seems to be mutable and insecure in our neighborhoods and the world at the moment, we can trust in the truth of God’s love and care for us and for all creation, and the promise of life in the face of death made manifest in the Resurrection of Jesus. Easter is coming.

God bless you all.

Faithfully,

The Rt. Rev. Ian T. Douglas
Bishop Diocesan

The Rt. Rev. Laura J. Ahrens
Bishop Suffragan