

2020 Diocesan Convention
An Online Convention during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Theme: "United with Christ in the Interest of Others"

Philippians: 2:4 "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

Here we are. Well, I suppose it is more accurate to say 'here I am and there you are, *N.*, and there you are, *N.*, oh, and there you are, *N.*, joining from somewhere else. While you are all here on my screen, you are also *there* wherever it is you are with your screen.

Things are different now. We have had to adjust, and the adjustments have been challenging. For some, all of this is getting even more challenging as time wears on. You know that point when what was at first just "temporary" starts to seem more permanent? Temporary change isn't so bad; but when the temporary starts to look like normal, the urge to get back to our former ways grows strong. Frustration builds, and our patience for these changes and our acceptance of the reasons for them wears very thin. I know lots of people who just want their old life back and are willing to accept any risks to do so. I completely understand these feelings. I'm not particularly afraid of this virus myself. But fear isn't why we have made these changes. This virus discriminates. It affects us all, sure, but it affects those who are vulnerable more: our elders; those who do not have ready access to medical care; those with other medical conditions; you know the list.

For me, protecting the vulnerable is worth the sacrifices and changes we have been enduring. It is consistent with our Baptismal promises.

For this reason I have invited us to look at all the challenges, changes, and sacrifices we have made and are being asked to continue through the lens of our Convention Theme (based on Philippians 2:4): "United with Christ in the Interest of Others." Listen for those words throughout my address. After the address you will have time in small groups to discuss ways you, your congregation, and others are United with Christ in the Interest of others, and what opportunities there might be for you to grow further in this mission.

Six months ago, when we all started figuring out this online technology, it was common to describe gatherings like these as 'virtual.' In that way, I found myself describing much of what we were doing as a Diocese and as congregations as 'virtual:' virtual worship; virtual coffee hour; virtual meetings; virtual parish visitations; virtual pastoral care, and now a virtual Diocesan Convention.

But along the way, I discovered that this new and unusual way of doing the common things of our spiritual and worship life really isn't virtual at all. With the common definition of virtual being something *simulated on a computer* (*Merriam-Webster*), after participating in lots of online worship and church activities around this Diocese, I have come to appreciate that while these activities are attended via a computer, there is nothing simulated about what you are doing.

It is very real.

The prayers are real. The praise is real. The music is real. The expressions of love and concern are real. The support, encouragement, and care that has been shared is real. The frustration, grief, and sorrow are real, too.

It is so real, in fact, that there are many who have embraced online worship so much that they are hopeful that it always remains an option. Many have come to enjoy being able to attend worship on their own timeline and in their pajamas. There are even folks, I am one of them, who enjoy attending worship with many different congregations on a given Sunday including congregations from across the Episcopal Church.

What we are doing Sunday morning may be online, but it is real.

It is more than Sunday morning worship, too. There are many parishes in our Diocese offering an online liturgy every day of the week. That may not be a change from pre-COVID days. I am aware that many congregations have always offered some form of daily prayer service (noon, evening, compline), but what is different is that these services are now online. What a gift to be able to tune in and join with others across the Diocese in prayer and praise.

For all of this I say thank YOU. Thank you to all of you who have worked hard to learn the technologies and programs that make this online worship possible. As you know, I am fond of saying that there are 48 congregations in this Diocese which means there are 48 different *usual* ways of worshipping (but only 48 actually do it right). Some stream on FB; some Zoom; some YouTube; some use a combination; some hold services on the CB radio—I LOVE that. There have even been some new things available online from our congregations, like story time with children's Bible stories.

Some congregations are having modified in-person worship that follow COVID-19 protocols to mitigate the risk of exposure or spreading the virus. I know of several worship services that have been done outdoors in creative ways (labyrinth, drive-in, baptisms, funerals).

This has NOT been a quiet time in the Diocese of Alaska. People have worked hard to adapt and find new ways to be communities of prayer and care.

Thank you.

Which brings me to an important point: this season has been hard work. It has been an emotional and spiritual marathon. This is true for ALL of us. We all need pastoral care and Christian love. In this new context, that has been a bit more difficult to give and receive. Sometimes it is easy to forget when we are struggling and frustrated and feeling that the church, or the clergy, or the worship leaders, or the bishop, or the vestry isn't giving us what we want or enough attention, that all of those people, too, are in need of love, care, support, and kindness.

To be united in Christ in the interest of others calls us to be patient and kind with one another: in a word-Loving.

Kindness and understanding are choices we can make when confronting our neighbor. Patience and gratitude are attitudes we can choose to embrace when confronting our own frustrations. As a people united in Christ in the interest of others, let patience and gratitude, kindness and understanding—LET MERCY surround us and define us.

These are difficult times. Your congregation needs your support. Your leadership needs your support. There is so much you can do to build-up and strengthen your congregation—even in your pajamas. ASK. CONTRIBUTE. And while you are at it, remember to give THANKS:

There are many blessings to this new online worship reality. I know Episcopalians hate change, but sometimes when change is forced on us we discover that there really are new ways to do old things. There are many important theological questions about the nature of sacraments that the Church is now having with heightened interest. We are seeing people attending our online worship services from far beyond our community boundaries. Which presents us with new and unexpected opportunities for evangelism and formation. What are the possibilities for your congregation to make disciples in this new reality?

Despite these blessings and all these new and hopeful things, I am mindful that for many of us, perhaps all of us, we continue to feel a loss. Something remains missing. And what is missing are those important elements of our Christian life that cannot be satisfied online. We are missing the fulness of Christian Fellowship--getting together in person; singing together; the warmth of a hand, or a hug at the peace; the smell of burning candles on the altar; the creak of pews as bodies shift in prayer; the bread and the cup of Holy Eucharist. These things cannot be simulated—not really; they can only be missed—and these are what we miss most.

As followers of Jesus, we need to taste, and see; to “touch and handle things unseen,” to quote Hymn 318. We need to participate in the sacramental transformation of things in this life—bread, wine, ourselves, others.

While spiritual Communion is considered full and sufficient, I know that for many it seems empty, and serves only as a reminder of how long it has been since receiving Communion. Many grow impatient, I know. Many worry that some will not return to our fellowship in the flesh if we don’t “get back to normal,” back to Holy Eucharist, soon. I hear and understand this concern.

But even this is an opportunity for evangelism and formation. My prayer is that this period of “fasting from the Eucharist,” as our Presiding Bishop has described it, will help us to deepen our understanding of what Eucharist means.

It is said that absence makes the heart grow fonder. My hope for this time is that our hearts will grow fonder of Holy Communion such that we realize the sacrament is NOT just something we receive as a commodity, something delivered to us for our own spiritual benefit, but something that we give ourselves to for the benefit of others as well. As it says in the Rite 1 Eucharistic Prayer: “here [at the altar with the Bread and Cup] we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our

selves, our souls and our bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee....]” Not for our selves alone or our own benefit, but humbly asking that all others who shall be partakers of [Holy Communion] may receive the Body and Blood of Jesus, be filled with grace and heavenly benediction, and made ONE body with him.

AMEN.

United in Christ in the Interest of others is about community. I pray this fasting time has been and will be a period for us to rediscover what it is to give ourselves to the body of Christ; to offer our selves not only for our personal spiritual benefit, but for the life and sake of the Community of Christ and this world. That, I believe, is something people will want to be part of—there are more than enough options for personal benefit in this selfish world. We are offering something the world needs desperately: a community of Love—the Body of Christ.

United in Christ in the Interest of others we are called to find opportunities, ways, even in this wilderness time, to be a living eucharist for the building up of communities of love.

This is what mission and ministry is all about, friends. At all times, in all places, even during a pandemic and a world roiling with social unrest, even when we may not be able to receive the Bread or drink the Cup, we have the gift—the GRACE of Communion. We have it to share, to give away, to make living and real in OURSELVES and TOGETHER in our communities.

We are evangelism in the flesh. Evangelism in the flesh is not about the right words. It’s not about sermons or definitions of what it is to be saved. Evangelism in the flesh is about how we make real this beloved community of Christ’s body. Evangelism in the flesh is also how we invite others to be part of something living and real and more than an event that happens once a week online OR in person.

United in Christ in the Interest of Others is Holy Communion. And that means more than Bread and Wine. If you feel you are missing Communion, offer yourself to the work of building communities of love. Join with others in this work. Holy Communion never ends—it is eternal. Now is the time of loving and serving the Lord. (alleluia, alleluia)

Have faith: this season, this pandemic, will end. We will return to in-person fellowship. We will again taste and see the Sacraments. We will again know the joy of being in our beloved and sacred places with our beloved and sacred friends.

But for now, the virus remains. And while some may be ready as individuals to risk their own health, in the interest of others we will continue to follow best practices to protect the health of the most vulnerable in our midst. Several congregations have developed COVID-19 mitigation protocols and are engaged in some form of in-person worship. In some communities the risk is reduced because of isolation of the whole population. Some are following the liturgy of Morning Prayer. A few are celebrating the Eucharist.

The policy of the Diocese of Alaska is that you must have a protocol designed and approved by the bishop for in-person worship services and events in your buildings. Outdoor activities do not require as many restrictions, but at the minimum, people should be wearing masks and maintaining social distancing. Every congregation and community is unique. As with nearly everything in this Diocese, one size does not fit all. There is a list of suggested COVID-19 Mitigation protocols on the Diocesan Webpage. Consult your elders, your local health care providers, be informed by science and not by social media or politics. Masks, distance, hand washing, and avoiding enclosed spaces and crowded spaces with non-household members have been demonstrated by science to reduce the risk of spreading the virus.

And until further notice, where the Sacrament of Holy Communion is shared, it will be the Bread only.

I hope our Convention Theme and all that I've said so far about it has made one thing clear: The Body of Christ is more than what we do on Sunday morning, and our life in Christ is not something we watch online like a Netflix show or order and consume like curbside take-out.

The Body of Christ is for the world.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life”

“For in Jesus all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

United in Christ in the interests of others (even the world) calls us to the work of reconciliation.

Turning on the news these days is an exercise. Even worse is opening my Facebook feed. The news is bad enough. The way people respond to one another about the news is even worse! Racial division. Social division. Political division. Stereotyping, name calling, hatred, disdain. The fabric of our communities isn't tearing, it is already tattered.

As the Body of Christ, our mission and ministry is reconciliation. And while people of faith should be involved in the public square; should be concerned about politics; should speak and exercise their moral conscience as informed by the Gospel and the life and ministry of Jesus; we should NOT be involved in the malevolent spirit of bitterness and hatred that has infected our nation perhaps even more than the COVID-19 virus.

Some fear a social apocalypse is nearing. I'm not so worried about that. But I do think that if such an apocalypse were to come, Stereotyping, Ridicule, Dismissing, and Contempt would be the Four Horseman.

In a social climate growing ever more polarized and hostile, I am asking us to embrace a ministry of reconciliation based on exercising the gifts of kindness, charity, understanding, and respect. This may be a ministry even more terrifying than “evangelism,” because it may challenge us to be present to and vulnerable with people who disagree with us. But I’m not asking you to change minds, to sacrifice your conscience or your values, or to accept what you know in your heart to be wrong. What I’m asking is that all of us reject the spirit of malevolence, the spirit of division and hatred, that is infecting us.

How can we as people of Christ be agents of reconciliation in this highly charged time? What opportunities are there for us to model reconciliation?

United in Christ in the interest of others means we are called to an active and physical faith that seeks and serves Christ in others. Selfish interest, malice, disdain, and indifference towards others, have no place in the Body of Christ. Snark has no place there either. My beloved friend Patricia, who many of you know is an actor by training and, therefore, keenly aware of the voice individuals use when reading scripture, has noted how sometimes folks express a degree of “snark” in Jesus’ voice when reading his confrontations with others. That probably says something about our experience of this world. But I agree with Patricia that it is very unlikely that Jesus ever spoke with a snarky tone.

Snark is not the tone of love and reconciliation. So let us resolve to leave it out of our interactions with those with whom we differ. Instead, let us as the body of Christ model loving dialogue, respectful disagreement, and grace in building bridges.

My prayers abide for all of you. This past September 4th I celebrated the 10th anniversary of my consecration as your Bishop. It has been blessing upon blessing for me, and I am looking forward to the Spirit working with us into the years ahead. Hopefully, hopefully, in seasons full of joy and peace in believing through the power of the Holy Spirit.