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A pastoral letter to the clergy of the diocese of Oregon

October 12, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ:

To say that things are different today than at the first of the year would be an understatement. Little about ministry today seems as it has been in the past. There is much to lament and to grieve about concerning what we have lost and there are a few hopeful signs for the future. This pastoral letter is focused only on the issue of communion during this time of pandemic.

How we do Sunday church is at the heart of who we are as Episcopalians and how we do church today is all tied up in the celebration of Holy Communion. Forty years ago, this was not universally so. My home parish of St. John's in Norman Oklahoma was a "morning prayer parish" with Eucharist celebrated monthly. And when it changed to Eucharist on Sundays the rubric allowing the use of morning prayer as the beginning of the rite was used. In Oregon today most all of our congregations hold Eucharistic services each week. The only exceptions are those who cannot afford to hire a priest each week and who thus rely on lay-readers and Morning Prayer.

At the beginning of the pandemic all of the churches of the diocese closed their buildings and over the course of several weeks many reappeared online using one of several online platforms to host their online services, which continued for the most part to be Eucharistic services. At these services, the priest consecrated the bread and the wine and consumed them while offering some form of prayer inviting folks to know the presence of God spiritually.

Then, after a few months, we began to reengage our buildings. A little over half of our congregations have submitted plans for some form of in person worship. For the most part these plans have evolved into some form of Eucharistic service with a limited number of parishioners being allowed to participate. These services have included a consecration of bread and wine with the celebrant offering the bread only for communion. In some cases, the celebrant has consumed the small amount of wine consecrated and in other cases the priest has chosen to join their community in not partaking of the wine but rather reverently disposing of the wine.

In a little under half of our congregations there has been no in-person worship and many of our people, and perhaps some of us as clergy as well, have not had the bread and wine of Eucharist for months. We are all feeling the loss of this important sacrament of the church. I am now hearing that there is pressure



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mounting in congregations to find a way to offer Eucharist to everyone. And yet the Pandemic and the real potential of an increase in COVID cases in the fall counsels us to caution.

Theologically, the rite of the Eucharist is a corporate celebration of the liturgy as the principal service to be held on a Sunday morning. It is an act of **community** as we gather to worship the Lord in the beauty of Holiness. We do not hold to a theology of private communion and while the taking of communion can be a deeply spiritual experience, a sort of me and Jesus moment, it is primarily, I believe, an act of the gathered community. This is why I have not agreed to the mailing of consecrated Eucharistic hosts to parishioners so that they can partake of communion at home, even during an online service. Nor would I agree to allow other forms of communion from a distance. I do this also because I know that this pandemic will pass and we should not, I believe, allow a crisis such as this to change our theology of Eucharist.

I know that this is a difficult time for you as clergypersons in the diocese and I know that you are working harder than ever to be present to your people during this challenging time. I realize that many of you would like to find a way to provide the Eucharist in wider terms, I wish that were possible. But I do not want to increase what is allowed at this time as we balance the Eucharistic needs of individuals and the health and safety of the people entrusted to our care.

I will continue to review individual plans sent to the diocesan office and I will continue to listen to your wonderful and creative ideas. I will agree to some and to others I will have to decline to say yes. Yet in all cases you and your ministry will be in my prayers.

At a zoom meeting of Fresh Start this week we were talking about how important pastoral care is in this time and noting how preaching is a key element to pastoral care. One of the senior clergy of the diocese put into the chat a note that everything we do can and should be done from a pastoral perspective. I could not agree more. All we do as ordained leaders should come from a deep sense of pastoral care and I commend you this day for your work.

May the Lord be with you,

Bishop Michael Hanley

Bishop of Oregon