

Bishop Stokes Announces Immediate Suspension of Public Worship Services

“‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”
Matthew 22:37-40

In my previous communications regarding the COVID-19 Crisis, I stated that the situation was fluid and that we would evaluate and adjust our practices as necessary. After prayer and deliberate consideration, and in consultation with others, I have determined that we need to take more proactive steps to protect people and help stem the spread of the Coronavirus.

Effective immediately, I am directing all churches in the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey to suspend public worship services and all other non-essential public gatherings until further notice. We will re-evaluate this decision as Holy Week approaches to determine whether it is safe and appropriate to re-open our buildings to our congregants and the wider public at that time.

I met earlier today with approx. 70 of our diocesan clergy and there was general agreement as to how we should proceed. Love and concern for the people of God led us overwhelmingly to discern together that safeguarding the people entrusted to our care called for this decision. We recognize that it requires a high degree of sacrifice from all 140 congregations across our diocesan community and the people they serve.

The Governor of the State of New Jersey has declared a state of emergency. Experts in the field of public health are strongly urging all of us to limit person-to-person contact. The primary objective in all of this is to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, thereby protecting the health of everyone. This applies especially to the most vulnerable – those over age 60 and those with underlying health concerns.

I am encouraging all churches to begin livestreaming worship services and am directing diocesan staff to assist with this process. A special web site is being set up at coronavirus.dioceseofnj.org to distribute the latest information including scheduled online worship services.

Clergy and staff at each congregation will be working to support and uplift their congregations through this difficult time through phone calls, video conferencing, email, and other communications means as appropriate.

Further, all face-to-face meetings of Diocesan groups and committees will be moved to video conferencing. Diocesan staff will work from home as much as their responsibilities allow.

Each church community may have essential services (examples might include funerals, feeding programs, etc.) that must continue. In these instances it is expected that any groups involved will follow all recommended protocols and precautions set forth by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov/) and the [New Jersey Dept. of Health](https://www.nj.gov/health/).

We remain a community of believers; we remain the church. The ways in which we come together in community will need to change in the short term, but our one purpose always

remain the same: to form people as disciples of Jesus Christ so they can flourish as human beings, alleviate the world's suffering, and participate in God's mission of reconciliation.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, starting with a cross symbol and the initials 'W.H.S.', followed by a stylized, cursive name.

The Right Reverend William H. Stokes, D.D.

12th Bishop of New Jersey