

A message from Bishop Miller

Journeying to a new place . . .

Dear Friends in Christ,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I write you with an update regarding our diocesan response to the COVID-19 pandemic. When this all began, I, like many of you, believed that we would be back to in-person worship by summer, that cases would decline, and that sooner rather than later this would be behind us. Sadly, this is not the case. Last week marked the first time that none of the counties served by the Diocese of Milwaukee were eligible under our guidelines to offer in-person worship. We are seeing an increasing number of cases, particularly in our rural counties - Dodge, Walworth, and Richland. To say that this is not a good development is to state the obvious.



This week the bishops of the Church had the privilege of meeting with Dr. Anthony Fauci, the head of the National Institute of Health (yes, that Dr. Fauci). He reminded all of us that the three most effective ways to combat the spread of COVID-19 are universal mask-wearing, physical distancing, and that outdoor gatherings are safer than indoor gatherings. He also told us that we are likely to see an increase in cases in wintertime and that if people must gather indoors to do so with doors and windows open and heat systems turned up higher than normal. Dr. Fauci also told us this pandemic would end but he did not believe we would see a vaccine until the second quarter of next year.

Moreover, our Wisconsin Council of Churches has recommended, based on what we are continuing to learn about the disease, that churches take a step back in reopening plans and return to online-only worship. Your Way Forward Task Force continues to weigh these recommendations.

One response to all this is to look back to what was before and either lament or seek to replicate it. One form this has taken is doing everything that congregations used to do in person online and adding to it. In such a model every congregation remains in its own orbit spending even more energy keeping all the plates spinning while adding more. My fear is that this is a recipe for burnout and exhaustion as evidenced by a recent survey of Wisconsin clergy. We need to remember what the Scripture says about looking back from the story Lot's wife being turned in to a pillar of salt in the book of Genesis through the murmuring of the Israelites in the desert found in the book of Exodus to Jesus' words recorded in the Gospel of Luke, "No one who puts their hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

I would invite you to see this present moment as a journey to a new place God has promised in the words of the hymn sadly no longer in our hymnal, Once to every Man and Nation, "new occasions teach new duties." The call to us is to learn the lessons of this time and move forward in hope and confidence that what God has in store for us is better than we can ask or imagine.

From the beginning, it has been clear to me that this pandemic can and should be a time of growth and innovation. That is why early on I insisted that we worship together as a diocese to free clergy up for pastoral care through increased connectivity in multiple platforms. Smaller gatherings at the parochial level supplement this common gathering. Recently, a group of clergy have begun to meet to discern and hopefully create a Christian formation program to be shared around the diocese. With the increased likelihood that we will not be back to public worship until the middle of next year, the

time is now to begin to think about how to observe Advent and Christmas in creative ways while grieving what cannot be at least this year.

I would remind you of my words to you in my Pentecost sermon,
"At all times God calls us to sing a new song. God is using this time to bring forth new ways, new opportunities to sing a new song and tell the story of God's love, even while we find ourselves on alien soil in our own living rooms..."

God has given us yet again new means to communicate his love with others. God continues to empower his people.

God is using this time, this moment, this opportunity to bring forth new ways to teach the Gospel, to make disciples, to proclaim the faith. We are singing to the Lord a new song and that makes my heart glad because now more than ever the world needs to hear Jesus' message, Love one another."

I am confident that God can and will use this time to strengthen his people if we will simply open ourselves to the possibilities before us.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Steven Andrew Miller". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

The Rt. Rev. Steven Andrew Miller
Bishop of Milwaukee