



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP OF NIAGARA

ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA

July 16, 2021

TO THE PEOPLE OF THE DIOCESE OF NIAGARA

For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”
- Matthew 18:20

Dear friends:

I am so very glad to be able to write – at long last – that we are beginning the process for re-opening our churches for public worship. Thanks be to God!

Now let me outline the highlights: churches may open as from July 25 and all must be open by September 12. New ministry guidelines were issued yesterday and can be found on the [diocesan COVID-19 resource hub](#).

I have allowed a range of opening dates to accommodate forward planning and, even more importantly, to accommodate planned holidays so that our leaders will be able to find the rest that they need in these months of slower pace. No leader should feel pressure to interrupt nor return early from holidays in order to reopen immediately.

There have been many articles in recent weeks that have been making the rounds helping us unpack the experience of the last 18 months - as if it is over - and prepare our souls and minds and bodies for building back. Many acknowledge how demanding this time has been, likening it to a marathon. It seems to be a popular – and accurate - trope. But the one that really captured my attention was [written recently by our very own Dr. Brian Kerley of the Church of the Transfiguration](#) in St. Catharines. I commend it to your attention. Dr. Kerley very wisely warns us that the pandemic has yet to run its course. That, to quote Diana Butler Bass, what we have lived through in recent months is the end of the beginning of the pandemic. We all recognize the danger of the variants of concern – Alpha, Delta, and Lambda - and there will likely be more additions to this list as this year progresses.

I believe that we have begun to manage living with the presence of COVID-19. What we have realized is that there is a seasonality for this virus - the spring and summer and even early fall are times of remission and restored normality. The late fall and winter are times of resurgence as we are forced indoors by the weather and the opportunities for transmission grow. This all underscores the importance of vaccination and of taking our rest when we have the opportunity so that our stores of resilience are replenished and we are able to greet each other with the joy and strength we'll need as we move into our autumnal rhythms.

These are the unwelcome facts that we now face - as a society, as a culture, as a Church. This identifiable rhythm alone will change us: change how we react, change how we respond and how we minister as the face and hands of Christ.

To that point, there are some significant learnings that we have harvested out of this time. A new future, marked by this experience, is ahead of us – one full of unasked for yet important change.

Technology for instance, has changed us in ways we could not have foreseen but much of which are very positive. We have begun to draw many more people into community – and to reach many more people with the Gospel and this development has been particularly welcome for those who were previously shut-in or shut-out of our in-person services. Our commitment to inclusion has expanded even further to include those far and wide who are part of the Body of Christ, but who, previously were unable to participate in our worship and fellowship.

Another realization that has - and will continue to form us is that the pandemic has brought us face to face with a very significant reality that although we love our buildings, it is not the fact of their existence that makes us the Church. They do play a significant role in keeping us gathered, in keeping us unified, and in keeping us focused; and our buildings have been containers for ministry. But it has been inspiring and revelatory that prayerful contemplation of the scriptures, worship in beauty and truth, the performance of the sacraments, and the works of profound generosity and mercy – all signs of the Church – have continued in different ways, in different places and modes in the midst of this crisis.

That is a tremendous blessing because these are the things that sustain us. These are the things that have always sustained us. And however long - or, pray God - short this pandemic is, they will sustain us still. We will continue to be the Church.

My challenge to us all as we enter the fall with its reopening, is to not only work to sustain the Church but to return to - with a future focus - the sustaining power of our common ministries – ministries that will take different forms, different modes – and to embrace the change that the pandemic has brought to our door and not to seek to turn the clock back to before.

Now, for those of us for whom returning is a difficult idea whether through anxiety at the thought of gathering again, or because the habit of faith has become faint through lack of contact with the gathered body of Christ, I pray that the Holy Spirit will strengthen you, uphold you and stir in you both the memory of the joy of Christian fellowship and the present need for the Church to be the Church. Jesus' message love and the care for all is even more vital today than ever and I pray that you feel that resonance and call in your heart.

These are all new realities that we must think through and privilege in our thinking as we begin to return and vision for by God's Grace – another year in ministry. I pray God's blessing on us all as we navigate this return to some kind of normalcy. May you rejoice in each other's presence and in the nearer presence of our Lord as you do so, for "where two or three are gathered, I am there also."

In Christ,



The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell
Bishop of Niagara