**From:** The Rt. Rev. Alan M. Gates
**To:** office@standrewsmv.org
**Subject:** Beyond Our Surge Capacity
**Date:** Thursday, October 15, 2020 4:45:54 PM

Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts

# *A pastoral reflection from Bishop Gates*

Oct. 15, 2020

September came and went. October is well underway. Autumn is a time when congregational life – like much of the world around us – is normally marked by renewed energy and fresh beginnings: familiar worship schedules resume; choirs end their summer hiatus; church schools regather; parish events and groups of all sorts reappear on the calendar.

This year, instead, September found us hitting what's been termed "The Six-Month Wall." We are anxious, fatigued, frustrated, plagued by feelings of helplessness. Of course we are. The coronavirus continues to take its toll, passing horrific statistical milestones and dominating our lives with limitations never imagined. Parents with school-aged children face unbearable pressures and no-win decisions. The devastatingly fractious and nonfunctional state of our national leadership continues. Anxiety about the stability of our electoral process is unprecedented. Vulnerable members of society feel ever more vulnerable.

Meanwhile, we are engaged with what has been termed the second pandemic in our midst – that of racism in America. The coronavirus has underscored realities of inequality in virtually every sector of our society. Our searing national reckoning on race – essential, and sinfully overdue – demands our hearts and urgent energy. As we deal with the coronavirus, it has been suggested that we do not have the individual or collective energy to engage the work of antiracism at this moment. Yet we may not postpone this urgent engagement. We have delayed and satisfied ourselves with good intentions for far too long. The work is at hand.

Six months into the confluence of these two pandemics, we find our "surge capacity" depleted. Describing the adaptive ways we humans cope with stress and anxiety, one psychologist says, "the pandemic has demonstrated both what we can do with surge capacity and the limits of surge capacity. When it's depleted, it has to be renewed. But what happens when you struggle to renew it because the emergency phase has now become chronic?" (i)

In the church, as in the wider world, the coronavirus has challenged us to adapt, to find new ways to do important things, to protect ourselves and one another, to create processes and methodologies, to maintain relationships, to keep on keeping on. “It’s important to recognize that it’s normal in a situation of great uncertainty and chronic stress to get exhausted,” comments the psychologist, “to feel like you’re depleted or experience periods of burnout.”(ii)

This exhaustion is showing up in our physical health and in our mental health. “The more accustomed you are to solving problems, to getting things done, to having a routine,” says another mental health professional, “the harder it will be on you because none of that is possible right now. You get feelings of hopelessness and helplessness.” (iii)

In the face of these realities, here are three ways I am trying to find strength for each day.

1. **Have compassionate expectations**. We expect so much of one another. We expect so much of ourselves. We expect so much of our churches. It’s right and good that we do – that we have high standards and aspirations. But right now, let’s also be patient with one another. Let’s not expect or demand more than we can individually or collectively manage. Even in our most vital endeavors, while striving for our best selves and highest ideals, let’s calibrate our expectations with the compassion demanded by the times.

2. **Maintain our most important relationships.** Lean on one another, and be there to be leaned upon. A popular cliché suggests that “God never gives us more than we can bear.” This is simply not born out by our experience of life, is it? Life’s burdens often become more than any of us can bear *on our own*. It is only by relying upon one another – those we love, and those who love us; our communities of faith and friendship; and even the kindness of strangers – these are the ways that we endure. God never gives us more than we can bear *together*: with this addition, the aphorism becomes true.

3. **Live as people of hope**. We cannot, of course, summon up faith by sheer dint of will. The “On Demand” button on my Comcast remote does not have access to the reservoir of hope for which I yearn. Yet I am convinced that there are times when I can and must exercise an element of choice in the posture with which I approach life. I choose to hope. For, to paraphrase Saint Paul, if we are only people of hope in hopeful times, what credit is that to us? But we are people of Resurrection faith precisely when resurrection is not what seems to appear before us. For “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1)

In the coming weeks we will face into further anxiety, further important work, and further adaptive challenges. Bishop Gayle Harris and I will be offering thoughts on the election, on our Diocesan Convention, on the essential work

of antiracism before us, and more. Meanwhile, we live in the holy hope so well expressed by a sometime priest of our diocese:

"Perhaps ... this prolonged period of unfulfilled desire will widen our hearts, increasing our empathy for those who live in a perpetual state of longing for what is denied them – peace, justice, equality, safety – all those whose deepest needs remain unmet. And perhaps now, having been deprived of people and connection and community for so long, we will appreciate anew how much we depend upon one another for our own flourishing." (iv)

May this holy hope, by the power of the Holy Spirit, carry us through and beyond the limits of our surge capacity.

Faithfully and fondly,
***+Alan***
The Rt. Rev. Alan M. Gates

---

(i) Ann Masten, psychologist and professor, as quoted in "Your 'Surge Capacity' Is Depleted – It's Why You Feel Awful," by Tara Haell; https://elemental.medium.com/your-surge-capacity-is-depleted-it-s-why-you-feel-awful-de285d542f4c

(ii) Ibid.

(iii) Pauline Boss, family therapist and professor, as quoted in "Your 'Surge Capacity' Is Depleted," ibid.

(iv) Noah Van Niel, "The Church is Other People," Plough Quarterly, August 12, 2020; https://www.plough.com/en/topics/community/church-community/the-church-is-other-people

---

*Find this reflection on our website here*.

---

Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts | 138 Tremont Street, Boston, MA 02111

Unsubscribe office@standrewsmv.org

Update Profile | About our service provider

Sent by news@diomass.org powered by

Try email marketing for free today!