The Episcopal Diocese of Western North Carolina

April 29, 2021

Dear Friends in Christ,

As we enjoy the splendor of Spring emerging in our region, I am mindful of the continually evolving nature of the Covid-19 virus and the numerous ways we all are doing our part to keep each other safe and slow the spread. I remain grateful for your ongoing patience and adaptability as we strive to provide everyone in the Diocese of Western North Carolina with the best public health and scientific information for our regathering guidelines.

Based on the latest metrics from North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, we are currently holding steady around 5% positive Covid-19 test rate for a 14-day rolling average, with individual counties slightly below or above that percentage. Likewise, 39.21% of the total state population is fully vaccinated and 48.7% of the adult population are vaccinated with at least one dose." These metrics are good news, even as we learn more and more about this novel coronavirus. As such, I will encourage everyone to continue utilizing best practices as often as possible.

Following the latest CDC recommendations of April 27 as well as Governor Cooper's Executive Order 209 of April 28, along with valuable input from our team of public health and science experts, **I am providing updated guidelines for all churches in the Diocese of Western North Carolina which go into effect on May, 9 2021.**

These guidelines will be effective until we get further guidance from the CDC and the State of North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services. Governor Cooper has expressed his hope to lift all capacity, physical distancing and mask mandates by June 1 **ONLY IF** 2/3 of our state is vaccinated. My hope is to follow this trajectory as well.

There is only one area of our common life that we are still gathering scientific and public health guidance for, namely congregational singing. At this time, my guidelines are included below and may be updated in the coming weeks.

Overall, I encourage the following:

1. **Please consider hosting as many church-related gatherings outside as often as possible.**
2. **Please continue to provide disposable masks and hand sanitizer at all gatherings.**
3. **Please encourage everyone in your communities to get vaccinated so that we can ease the remaining public health mandates.**

Finally, I remain grateful for all that you are doing to further the mission and ministry of Jesus in Western North Carolina.

Faithfully,

The Rt. Rev. José A. McLoughlin

Capacity and Physical Distancing

Indoor spaces	Outside spaces
Clergy and Vestry leadership may consider increasing indoor, in-person gatherings to 50% occupancy capacity as long as 3 feet of physical distance between individuals or family groups is maintained. ***3 feet physical distance is allowed only when the following criteria is met:*** • ***community transmission and hospitalizations are at low indices;*** • ***indoor spaces are well ventilated either with fresh air or upgraded HVAC systems with high-grade filters.*** ***Should the wider community experience a surge, the diocese may re-implement greater physical distancing requirements.***	Outside, in-person gatherings no longer have any capacity limitations. In our commitment to decrease viral spread, for all outside, in-person gatherings, all family groups and individuals are encouraged, but not required, to maintain 3 feet physical distance. Everyone is strongly encouraged to monitor their local environment, especially when there is substantial or high community transmition. Likewise, everyone is encouraged to practice greater physical distancing of more than 3 feet in larger crowds, especially more than 200 people.

Masks

Indoor spaces	Outside spaces
Mask use is required for all in-door worship and large (more than 20 people) parish gatherings regardless of vaccination status. Clergy and Vestries ***may*** lift mask requirements for small gatherings of less than 20 people ***if*** all persons are vaccinated. Again, this is safest when indoor spaces are well ventilated.	Mask use is ***only*** required for outside gatherings when congregational singing is included in the event.
Clergy/laity when preaching/reading at the lectern/pulpit may remove their mask while at the pulpit/lectern if there are no persons within 10 feet of the preacher/reader.	To help decrease viral spread, everyone is strongly encouraged to monitor their local indexes of community spread and hospitalizations and, when necessary, wear masks in larger crowds of more than 200 people.

Congregational Singing and Choirs

Indoor spaces	Outside spaces
Congregational singing is now allowed with the following mandatory requirements: All people **must** wear masks. All individuals and household groups **must** maintain ***3 feet of physical distance***.	Congregational singing is allowed with the following requirements: All people must wear masks during the singing only. All individuals and household groups must maintain ***3 feet of physical distance during the singing only***.
Choir members must be masked and maintain 6 feet of physical distance between singers. These guidelines are in effect regardless of vaccination status.	Choir members must be masked and maintain 3 feet of physical distance between singers. These guidelines are in effect regardless of vaccination status.

Cleaning (CDC Report 4/5/2021)

Indoor spaces	Outside spaces
Church spaces do not need to be professionally sanitized. Rather, provide clean and well-ventilated spaces. It is always a good idea to regularly clean (with soap and water or disinfecting cleaning solutions) frequently touch objects.	No cleaning required. You are encouraged to consider wiping down chairs used for outdoor worship if you have more than one worship service on a Sunday.

Use of Worship Books

Indoor spaces	Outside spaces
Since surface transmission infection is remote (1 in 10,000), Prayer Books, Hymnals and Bibles may be put back in pews for use. If your church holds more than one worship service on a Sunday, please consider wiping down all books in between services or using paper bulletins. If your church holds only one worship service on a Sunday, there is no need to wipe down books.	Since surface transmission infection is remote (1 in 10,000), Prayer Books, Hymnals and Bibles may set out for use. If your church holds more than one worship service on a Sunday, please consider wiping down all books in between services or using paper bulletins. If your church holds only one worship service on a Sunday, there is no need to wipe down books.