



The Episcopal Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast

July 28, 2021

Dear clergy, wardens and lay leaders of churches without clergy,

I return from my vacation much rested and deeply grateful for the gift of sabbath and time with my family. I am also grateful for our diocesan staff and for you. It is your ministry and leadership that afforded me the time and space for refreshment. Thank you.

To be honest, I am frustrated that my first letter to you after my return must again focus on the impact to our ministry by the COVID pandemic. I know you are frustrated, too. I need not recite what you already know about the recent surge of the Delta variant in our country, and more so in our region.

While I was away, a few of you contacted me to share your decisions to "tap the brakes" on your local practices and protocols. I am very grateful to you for letting me know, and I fully support your decisions. They are the right and responsible things to do. If you have not done likewise, I strongly encourage every congregation to do so.

The CDC's announcement yesterday urging vaccinated people to wear masks in areas of substantial or high transmission is clear. Here is a link to determine the level of transmission in your county: <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-view>.

In the past, we have done our best to follow such guidelines. Because we cannot know who is vaccinated, we must continue to focus our decisions on the wellbeing of the most vulnerable to the virus. In great part, that now seems to be our children who cannot yet be vaccinated. Consequently, as of the date of this notice, all churches in the diocese shall return to our previous diocesan directive regarding mask-wearing during all indoor services. This directive also includes any indoor events, classes, or gatherings. From our protocols dated May 19, 2020:

“Thus, face coverings (defined as non-vented, non-medical grade masks) are mandatory for everyone attending every public in-person worship service. Clergy and lay leaders may remove their face covering to preside and to preach as long as they are 12-15 feet from others. A face covering for the priest is required while praying the Eucharistic Prayer, with the exception that it may be removed if the elements are covered by a linen cloth. Lectors and intercessors may remove face coverings when reading, while also maintaining 12-15 feet from others.”

Because of the fluidity of the situation and the fatigue of it all, let us commit to this practice for the next three weeks [until August 16] and then revisit the situation.

I am not reinstating any other directives across the diocese. However, I strongly urge you to consider the following:

1. Return to the distribution of communion in one kind [bread only].
2. Promote responsible physical distancing and curb the duration of worship. I have read that one of the current concerns by health officials is the transmission distance of the Delta variant.
3. Practice contact tracing.

I trust you to adapt, amend and/or expand these recommendations as they suit your local context, architecture, and congregation.

As you communicate your decisions with your people, remember that how we say something is often just as important as what we say. Emotions about vaccinations and masks may be rising as fast as the virus itself. Some folks are edgy; some are resentful. Everyone is weary. Fatigue and frustration are even evident in health officials and governmental officers. So, be mindful of your message to your people. Consider reminding them that we do not always know the full story beneath what we observe in our neighbors. And too, our assumptions about the reason whether or not someone is wearing a mask or has been vaccinated, may not be correct. Remind them of who they are as children of God and heirs of grace. Remind them of the fruits of the Spirit in Philippians. Remind them of Paul's charge in Romans 12: 10-16. "Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another."

Finally, as you make plans for ministry with and for our children, the following recommendations come from a local pediatric epidemiologist:

"Children 12 years and younger are among the highest risk for covid-19 infection because they cannot be vaccinated. We must do everything we can to protect them and decrease their risk of infection, including vaccinating those who take care of them. I recommend everyone working with children be vaccinated. Also, everyone, including children 2 years and older, who are not vaccinated should wear a mask,"

Dr. Benjamin Estrada, Pediatric Infectious Disease
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If you have any specific situations or issues that you would like to discuss, please call me. And may Jesus' words from this morning's Gospel reading carry us through the storm. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

In Christ,



JRK/jsj