



Bishop's Pastoral Guidance

From: Office of the Bishop
To: Clergy and Lay leadership
Date: April 1, 2021
Re: in-person re-gathering in Sanctuary

Dear Clergy & Lay Leadership,

At the recent Renewal of Ordination Vows Service and the Clericus meeting on Tuesday, March 30th, concerns and apprehensions were raised about appropriate protocols for in-person gatherings in our sanctuary spaces for the Season of Easter. During a very cordial and respectful conversation, it was noted that the overall knowledge of the COVID-19 Virus has increased greatly since the onset of the pandemic. We are very grateful for the continuing research as well as the work of the medical professionals who have labored mightily on our behalf this past year. It was also noted that many of our congregants have now received their vaccinations and are considered fully immunized. However, it was noted that there are mutations arising which are changing our situation. And, it was also noted that the virus remains highly contagious and that recent infection numbers are again rising. We need to remain vigilant and alert even as we are optimistically looking forward to the end of this pandemic.

I have been in conversation with our two scientists on the COVID 19 Task Force (Dr. Thomas De Marco and Dr. George Curlin) seeking their guidance and counsel on the most appropriate ways to address new and recent developments on this health and safety conundrum before the nation and global community. Here is a summary of their advice:

- The virus remains a threat to human safety so follow the science
- Be conservative in our approach
- Practice social distance – Center for Disease (CDC continues to recommend a distance of 6 feet apart
- A family unit that lives together need not observe this rule, sitting together is appropriate
- Next person or family unit should be socially distanced
- Allow for at least a minimum of 90 minutes in between services
- Wipe pews down with appropriate sanitization product – deep cleaning no longer required

- No singing in communal setting indoors
- Do not ‘pack the church’ but maintain the consideration of social distancing guidelines
- We have an older population in our parochial demographic, most of our demographic is fully vaccinated or partially vaccinated - One dose is 80% safe, full dosage is maximum safety
- Wear mask at all times during the service, including outdoor worship
- Print out service sheets and do not reuse
- Use sign up sheet for contact tracing
- Advice anyone who isn’t feeling well to stay home
- Do not turn away nor prevent unvaccinated members from attending worship (bishop’s strong pastoral advice)
- Temperature check may be dispensed with because it does not prove convincingly that an individual isn’t a carrier of the antibodies
- Don’t be overtly concerned about the variants, the vaccines are capable of mitigating against their impact
- Holy Communion to parishioners should continue to be of ONE KIND (bread/body of Christ). Clergy consecrate both bread and wine (body and blood). However, clergy only consume communion in both kinds
- If the prefilled communion kits are used communion in both kinds are preferred because the kits are safely sealed and only the individual communicant has access to her/his communion kit
- Start conservatively and maintain vigilance at all times

If the infection rate continues to rise the diocese will revisit this new pastoral guidance and advice accordingly. Our two scientists are absolutely convinced that the vaccines are a game-changer in protecting the health and safety of our people. I am strongly urging everyone to be vaccinated as soon as you get the opportunity to do so.

Our beloved diocese’s primary concern is the health and safety of the people of God. However, we are patently cognizant of God’s beloved people longing to return to their sanctuary, their holy spaces. They have waited over a year to experience this vista of new life and renewed hope, and what better time to live into this new normal than Easter which we celebrate in this holy season. As we do so, let us maintain our virtual presence and find appropriate and user-friendly ways to maintain our hybrid worship presence. This virus has introduced the church to an entirely novel way of becoming a global presence and grow our churches presence both missionally and numerically. It offers tangible evidence of ‘seeds of growth and channels of hope’ in our ministry and mission vocation. By pushing us to the limits of our creative and adaptable ingenuity, it has provided a user-friendly way to offer pastoral ministry to homebound members, the elderly, saints in assisted living facilities and the list of impactful pastoral care goes on.

I want to close with a pastoral reminder. While many of our members have been vaccinated and are feeling great relief, this is not the case for everyone. At the time of issuing this pastoral guidance the State of Maryland's positivity rate has risen to 5.3% which gives cause for concern. As such any clergy, or lay leaders in congregations without clergy leadership, who feels that their situation requires a more conservative or restrictive set of protocols, they should feel free to institute them, including a return to full virtual worship, with my full blessing and support. I am inspired by the conscientious and diligent adherence to the protocols exercised by every member of our diocesan family. Each of you has been a model of restraint and discipline during this pandemic. My prayer is that we continue in the same mode; together we shall overcome and regather as a family in person for worship, fellowship, and fun.

Stay vigilant! Stay Conscious! Stay Informed! Stay Safe! Stay Connected! Stay Loved and Be Loved! Stay Calm! Your bishop and Lynn love you very much; you are our family; we pray for you every day. God loves you and so do we!

Be Neighborly one to the other! Keep the Faith! Christ is Risen! He is Alive! Alleluia!

Every blessing for a joyful Easter!

Your friend and bishop,
The Right Rev. Santosh K. Marray
XI Bishop, Diocese of Easton
Holy Week 2021