



The Episcopal Diocese of Western North Carolina

June 16, 2021

Dear Beloved in Christ,

As we continue to live into our new normal with the rapid pace of new changes for regathering as a society, I want to share with you some observations of where we are as a Diocese as well as my latest guidelines.

First, it is clear that the vaccination rate in North Carolina has considerably slowed. At the present moment, we remain at 55% of the adult population having received at least one dose and our daily percent positive rate is 2.3%. Here in Western North Carolina, we are markedly below the state average, at 42.9% of the adult population has received at least one dose.

Based on these metrics and the insights from public health and medical experts, we are on target for living with Covid-19 for years to come, especially as new variants emerge. I will continue to monitor the situation and manage our collective response with an understanding that at any moment we may need to reintroduce safety restrictions.

Second, what also remains clear is the Gospel imperative to love God and our neighbors as we love ourselves. I want to encourage all in the Diocese of Western North Carolina in patterning their lives that looks to the common good of everyone, demonstrating generous hospitality to all, regardless of their vaccination status. At all times, we should seek to express our love for one another, rather than seeking to protect our own self-interest or privilege.

With these two observations in mind, in addition to my previous update of May 2021 that lifted space capacity and physical distancing requirements, **I am now lifting the mask requirement for all worship gatherings beginning Sunday, July 4, 2021, while also offering the following guidelines:**

With regard to face masks, individuals and congregations should adopt the following framework in planning for public worship:

- **All may wear a face mask.** Each of us will have a different comfort level about being with others in public. Those gathering for public worship should feel welcome to wear a face mask if they prefer to do so. Some may choose to wear a face mask when they cannot maintain physical distance from others.
- **Some should wear a face mask.** The CDC recommends that those who have not yet been vaccinated should wear a face mask when they are in close quarters with others. This would apply to children who are too young to be vaccinated, those who cannot be vaccinated, and those who have not chosen to be vaccinated.

2. Congregations may establish and implement a more restrictive plan with regards to building capacities, physical distancing and face masks, but must do their best to accommodate all people, those vaccinated and those not.
3. At this time, during celebrations of Holy Eucharist, the Common Cup is still not allowed. As a sign of hospitality, Clergy and Lay Eucharistic Ministers might consider choosing to be masked during distribution of the elements.
4. With respect to the exchange of the Peace, the collection of an offering, and any other worship practices that have been modified during these past months, congregational leaders should reintroduce these practices gently and at an appropriate pace, teaching those gathered for worship to be respectful of the needs of those others who are around them.
5. All involved in ministries with children, and in particular with children who are too young to be vaccinated, should continue to wear a mask.
6. Congregations may return to hosting coffee and receptions after worship and at other times. Safer practices should be followed, including the provision of individual servings rather than the offering of a potluck meal.

Finally, every Clergy and Vestry is strongly encouraged to remain vigilant and aware of the Covid-19 and vaccination metrics in their local context as this may provide additional helpful information as leadership bodies discern what is best for their church community. Know that I will continue to trust our Clergy and Vestries, working with others as they see fit, to develop and implement plans for worship in their own congregations.

These plans will be as unique as each ministry context while remaining fully within the guidelines established for all in the Diocese to use. Congregational plans should be carefully communicated with members, with prominent public signage as appropriate.

I remain grateful for each of you and the ways you continue to serve God's people in Western North Carolina.

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "José A. McLoughlin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "José" being particularly prominent.

The Rt. Rev. José A. McLoughlin
Bishop