



The Episcopal Diocese of Western North Carolina

I will praise the name of God with a song;
I will magnify him with thanksgiving.
- Psalm 69:30

March 19, 2021

Greetings dear friends,

Today, as I monitor the status of vaccinations across the nation, I am filled with deep gratitude for the miracle of science and the courage of our public health officials and frontline medical workers who have sacrificed so much for our wellbeing. I am incredibly thankful to hear the news from clergy and members of our congregations all across our diocese who have been able to receive the vaccination and once again welcome the peace of God that passes all understanding.

Yesterday afternoon I had the privilege of talking with several lay and clergy leaders in the diocese, two of whom have extensive backgrounds in epidemiology, the practice of medicine and the expertise in public health. Together we discussed the current state of the Covid-19 virus and explored the possibilities of expanding our regathering phase in the Diocese of Western North Carolina.

Here is what we know at this time:

1. The average positive Covid-19 test rate is 4.5%
2. [20.4% of the NC population has received the first vaccine dose](#)
3. [13.2% of the NC population is fully vaccinated](#)
4. Public health guidelines now permit small household gatherings of fully vaccinated people with other fully vaccinated people.
5. Public health guidelines urge even fully vaccinated people to continue to maintain physical distances of 6 feet or more, refrain from physical contact, and wear masks *when in larger gatherings with multiple households*.
6. All people wash their hands regularly.
7. It is better to gather outdoors rather than indoors.
8. It is strongly recommended to ventilate all inside spaces with fresh air.
9. It is strongly recommended to upgrade all ventilation systems with high-grade filters.

Therefore, after reflecting on the current metrics for the 28 counties in our diocese and in consultation with public health officials, **I am revising the current guidelines for in-person gatherings beginning Sunday, March 28 which include the following:**

1. Clergy and Vestry leadership may consider **increasing in-person, indoor gatherings to 30% of seating capacity** for all indoor church spaces as long as this capacity simultaneously meets the physical distancing requirement below (see #4). **If you are not able to meet the distancing requirement, then you must reduce capacity to satisfy that condition.**

2. **No capacity restrictions for in-person, outdoor gatherings as long as the physical distancing requirement is followed.**
3. **For all indoor and outdoor gatherings, all people must wear masks.**
4. For all indoor and outdoor gatherings, all family groups and individuals *must be adequately spaced apart at least 6 feet or more. If your space does not adequately allow for 6 feet of physical distancing for every individual or household group, then you can only allow the number of people your particular space will safely accommodate.*

Please know that I continue to trust clergy and parish leaders to discern what is best for their context.

Likewise, know that I will continue to seek the guidance from public health advisors and closely monitor the situation to determine when any additional changes to our guidelines are warranted. If there is evidence of a wave of increasing infection cases, hospitalizations or deaths, a revision of the guidelines might be necessary.

I am also aware of the proximity of Palm Sunday, Holy Week and Easter and the anxiety many clergy feel as we approach Easter Season under this pandemic. I invite everyone to connect with your colleagues to discern the best way to meet the pastoral and liturgical needs of your community.

Finally, I remain grateful for all that you are doing to further the mission and ministry of Jesus 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 the most prominent.

The Rt. Rev. José A. McLoughlin
Bishop