



Pictured: The Midstate Trail extending through the center of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Photo: All Trails/Susan Serra via www.onlyinyourstate.com

A Journey By Stages – Part II

A Preface from the Working Group

Thank you all for your work and your prayers during this time. None of us knows what God will call us to, and none of us asked for this challenge. Yet each of us has found ways to serve God and God's people in new and powerful ways during this time in our life together.

While the Bishops' Pastoral Directive, *A Journey by Stages*, provides specific guidance about how to operate as congregations during this time, that document was issued as just that: to guide Episcopalians across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in our two dioceses. Yet context matters. This letter and the COVID-19 Congregational Checklist are intended to provide further support to our congregations in the work that lies ahead. Of course there will be unusual circumstances and special situations. We hope that many of these issues will be addressed by local clergy, in consultation with lay leaders and the shared wisdom of deanery clergy. We are entering into a time where we need to rely on your experience, wisdom, and the gifts you have been given.

As much as we all would like clear, prescriptive guidance about so many matters, this document (like the one that preceded it) is meant to offer more descriptive support. Consider, for example, the many questions we have received about worship, both indoor and out. The reality is that there are no two congregations in our diocese with the same opportunities and challenges. We will still need to make the best plans we can considering our own local conditions and the changing health environment. The guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control, the MA Department of Public Health, the Bishops' Pastoral Directive, as well as the accompanying COVID-19 Congregational Checklist, give us the contours and direction of how we might engage in this work. They also give us some boundaries of what is and is not permissible. It is up to us to work within that framework to develop plans for our particular ministry settings. Your fellow clergy, gathered by deanery, are a good sounding board for your questions and struggles. While we all need to work on this in our own context, we are not alone in the midst of this very challenging process.

Clergy and congregations should anticipate being informed by ALL of these resources: CDC, MA DPH Checklist, the Bishops' Pastoral Directive, and the COVID Congregational Checklist, as you make your plans for Stage 2 and beyond. We recognize there is a certain amount of "decision fatigue." We want to be told (at some level) what to do. And we are all still dealing with no small amount of anxiety. There remain many unknowns and the situation seems to change weekly. It seems predictable that the re-entry into many aspects of our lives is going to lead to some kind of second wave; what is unclear from this vantage point is what that will look like. So in spite of anxiety and decision fatigue we need to support one another and carry one another's burdens and know that we do this work together, and always with God's help.

We have put in place an approval process not as a bureaucratic exercise, but as a way to ensure that we are all being careful, reflective, and mutually accountable to one another. This process can in fact (and we pray will) build up the Body of Christ in love. We all want to keep our people safe and keep them connected to the love of God and each other during this time. The approval process is intended to help us make sure we don't inadvertently overlook something important.

Nothing in these guidelines supersedes guidance from the CDC, MA DPH, or your local Boards of Health. The goal is to provide more detailed guidance as a follow-up to *A Journey By Stages* to help you make faithful decisions as local Christian communities.

Moving from one stage to another

As much as possible, approval to consider the move from Stage 1 to Stage 2 will be given on a regional basis based on the health care criteria established by the Commonwealth and in conversation with public health professionals. Conditions in Berkshire County are and will continue to be different from Worcester or the Pioneer Valley and we should act accordingly. Once the Bishop has determined that a particular region may move to the next stage, individual congregations *may* move to the next stage, but only after having prayerfully planned for how they will operate in that next stage. The COVID-19 Congregational Checklist is intended to make sure that this plan is comprehensive and safe. **No congregation will be forced to make changes or to hold public services or events. Individual congregations may always choose to remain under the policies from an earlier stage.** All congregations should be prepared to move back to a previous stage should public health conditions worsen.

While the length of this document and the magnitude of the work ahead of us may seem daunting, we recommend that you use the following worksheet as you engage with parish leadership in conversation, decision making, and preparation. Engaging the worksheet together can help provide direction forward and shape conversations. The finished product will be what's submitted to your dean for further conversation and approval.

Your colleagues in ministry,

The Rev. Dr. Richard Simpson, *Canon to the Ordinary*

The Rev. Vicki Ix, *Canon for Communications*

The Rev. Aileen DiBenedetto, *Dean of the Worcester Clericus*

The Rev. Peter Swarr, *Dean of the Hampden Clericus*

The Rev. Michael Tuck, *Dean of the Berkshire Clericus*

The Rev. Tanya Wallace, *Dean of the Franklin-Hampshire Clericus*