

Updated recommendations for navigating the next chapter in our pandemic landscape: February 16, 2021

Beloved in Christ in the Rocky Mountain Synod,

We have entered a new phase of pandemic church life – a phase that is at once hopeful and highly complicated. The hope comes from current efforts to vaccinate as much of the population as possible, which should eventually inhibit the ability of the virus to spread quickly and minimize risk of contracting COVID-19. The complexity comes from a combination of factors including:

- 1) the emergence of variant strains of COVID which are shown to spread the virus more easily and might prove more deadly;
- 2) uncertainty about how best to navigate in-person gatherings for communities in which not everyone is vaccinated;
- 3) the impact of growing pandemic fatigue leading to non-compliance with protocols that keep the virus from spreading;
- 4) the many unknowns that still remain about the virus itself as well as uncertainty about the long-term impacts of vaccinations.

The following recommendations do not pretend to cover all the issues facing our synod's congregations and members with respect to this next phase of the pandemic. The CDC, local public health officials, and credentialed epidemiologists such as Dr Michael Osterholm remain your best source of information and guidance with respect to the science of the pandemic. The goal of these recommendations is to offer some broad, common sense guidance for congregations and rostered ministers alike as we seek to navigate the coming months together.

Given the information currently available, it seems reasonable to assume that the rate of transmission of COVID-19 will continue to diminish over time as more people are vaccinated and **if we continue to observe protocols** related to public safety during a pandemic in the face of new variants. It is important to keep in mind, however, that while current trends of transmission have already decreased in most places since the end of last year, current rates are still generally much higher than they were during much of last spring, summer and early fall. Decreasing rates can give us a false sense of security if we are not looking at the full picture. Perspective matters and caution must be advised. Contracting COVID-19 at any time always carries the risk of serious illness, hospitalization or death.

At this time, many congregations are in conversation and discernment about gathering for in-person worship and other congregational events. While it is too early to speak with any certainty about when in-person gatherings, especially those inside buildings, will no longer pose a major risk, it would be wise to plan for no earlier than the end of the summer or the start of the fall. Recognizing that with this virus there is always risk involved when we gather in person, the

specific timeline for in-person gatherings that pose less risk will depend upon many variables, some of which are not in our control.

Until then, here are some critical, common-sense guidelines:

- Congregations should engage the changing pandemic landscape with a commitment to a hybrid approach. Those offering online worship should continue that option for the foreseeable future so that no one feels compelled to show up for any in-person worship or event when it is not yet completely safe to do so. ***It is still recommended congregations rely primarily on digital worship platforms for the next several months as we monitor the impact of new variants of the virus as well as the progress of vaccination efforts.***
- Any in-person worship experience or congregational gathering that occurs in spring or summer should ***prioritize an outdoor venue with limited participants who observe physical distancing and the use of face coverings.*** In-door venues should be used only with very limited numbers in a well-ventilated space while respecting physical distancing and use of face coverings.
- ***At any in-person congregational gathering, all participants should observe all pandemic protocols regardless of vaccination status,*** including physical distancing and use of face coverings. Congregations should provide guidelines that assure all participants that pandemic protocols will be observed. Those unwilling to honor protocols should not be permitted to participate in any in-person congregational gathering.
- ***Pastors, deacons and worship leaders*** who have not yet been vaccinated should not be expected or pressured to lead any in-person congregational worship or participate in any in-person gatherings or events. Congregational councils are encouraged to have this conversation with their rostered ministers; the Office of the Bishop is available for consultation on this matter.
- Congregations and rostered ministers are encouraged to ***support and engage local vaccination efforts,*** to assure that everyone in the surrounding community has accurate information and equal access to vaccines.
- In this season of “now but not yet” congregations, ministries and leaders of our synod are strongly encouraged to engage in ***intentional conversations about what it means to be a church becoming in light of our experience*** of the last year. What have you learned about being church in your local context? What new insights have you gained? What will be different as you move forward?

As we have noted in earlier recommendations, the context of our synod varies widely. The realities for large congregations will differ from those of smaller congregations. Each of our five states have different approaches to vaccination efforts and varied guidelines for what is permitted in public spaces. Please consult information pertinent to your local context.

Our previous Rocky Mountain Synod recommendations contain valuable information and perspectives that remain relevant for this current moment. We strongly suggest you review them as you consider these latest guidelines. [They can be found here.](#)

Yours in Faith,
Bishop Jim Gonia

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