



From the Bishop

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Tenth Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Kansas

March 11, 2021

As we come through the second Lent of the COVID-19 pandemic, I have been heartened by the downturn in case rates throughout Kansas and the United States. Still, we must remain vigilant and reflect on the more than 500,000 fellow citizens who have died during this pandemic.

With the increasing availability of vaccines, I encourage you to be vaccinated according to your doctor's guidance. The Episcopal Church does not recognize a religious exception to vaccination. Shawnee County just opened vaccination appointments for clergy; I have made mine, and I hope you will make yours as soon as you can. Even as vaccines roll out, we must do what we can to care for those of our neighbors who have not yet had the opportunity to be vaccinated.

The March 8 update from the Centers for Disease Control included this helpful information about **What We Know and What We're Still Learning**:

- **We know** that COVID-19 vaccines are effective at preventing COVID-19 disease, especially severe illness and death.
- **We're still learning** how effective the vaccines are against variants of the virus that causes COVID-19. Early data show the vaccines may work against some variants but could be less effective against others.
- **We know** that other prevention steps help stop the spread of COVID-19, and that these steps are still important, even as vaccines are being distributed
(<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html>)
 - **We're still learning** how well COVID-19 vaccines keep people from spreading the disease.
 - Early data show that the vaccines may help keep people from spreading COVID-19, but we are learning more as more people get vaccinated.
- We're still learning **how long** COVID-19 vaccines can protect people.
- Until we know more about those questions, everyone — even people who've had their vaccines — should continue taking basic prevention steps when recommended
(<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/fully-vaccinated.html>).

Thus, in accordance with CDC guidance, wearing masks and distancing must continue for all activities on Episcopal Church property, except as described below. This is a virus that is transmitted through the air, so indoor congregational singing will remain suspended; however, I encourage you to gather outside for masked congregational singing.

Building use continues to be at the discretion of clergy. I again counsel clergy to be in conversation with lay leaders when making decisions about moving through this pandemic.

Most previous guidelines continue with slight adjustment, from Monday, March 15, 2021

- The diocesan staff's collection of county-level data is proving helpful to our clergy and lay leaders, so the practice will continue indefinitely. **The color-coding and guidance for indoor worship will also remain in effect.** These are the three tiers and their meaning:
 - **Yellow** (less than 10 percent test positivity and less than 100 per 100,000 incidence). Unless under a general diocesan moratorium, parishes can conduct indoor in-person worship and other events.
 - **Orange** (greater than 10 percent test positivity or greater than 100 per 100,000 incidence). Local discernment; parishes can conduct indoor in-person worship and other events, but clergy and lay leaders must confer and discern if it is wise to do so in light of what they know their local context and culture.
 - **Red** (greater than 10 percent test positivity and greater than 100 per 100,000 incidence). Indoor in-person worship and other events must be suspended for at least two weeks. Return to indoor in-person worship and events is allowed after two weeks if a parish enters the Orange status.
- Participants over the age of two are required to wear a mask and practice social distancing for all gatherings on Episcopal Church property, except as described below.
- Use of the common cup is still restricted. Communion may be distributed in bread only. We are finding that the safest way to do this is for a few ministers to bring the bread to socially distanced worshippers, while limiting direct contact.
- Registration, sign-ups or attendance records must continue to be used and records kept for one month.
- Indoor congregational singing is prohibited.
- Soloists and small groups may sing, with masks, indoors, provided they are 30 feet from fellow worshippers.
- Congregational singing may happen outside while masked.
- Non-wind instrumental music is encouraged.
- Use amplification equipment as possible to allow less need for personal projection.
- Make services shorter: readings may be limited to the gospel and one other lesson.
- Individuals working alone in offices may wear masks at personal discretion.
- Continue ventilation practices: open windows and doors!
- Spaces and surfaces must continue to be regularly cleaned. (Because of new learning, previous guidance about cleaning after every individual use may be disregarded.)
- Outside groups are allowed to use space according to local leadership discernment, provided they agree to (and actually do) follow these guidelines.
- As able, continue to offer online and hybrid worship and meeting options to continue welcoming those who do not wish to gather in person.
- When a positive test result is reported for a person who attended a gathering, parish leadership should call the local health department for guidance.

New and significantly updated guidance, effective with the above on Monday, April 5, 2021

Feeding ministries and coffee hour

CDC guidance tells us that “currently, there is no evidence to suggest that handling food or consuming food is associated with COVID-19.” It is not the food that transmits the virus, it is the time spent breathing in proximity to other people.

Therefore, coffee hour and feeding ministries may resume for congregations in the Yellow and Orange Zones, with the following considerations:

- Encourage handwashing, and place hand sanitizer at regular intervals around a space.
- Gatherings that include unmasked eating must be carefully planned with respect to time and place. Those who want to avoid unmasked people must be able to do so easily.
- Eat outdoors, if possible. You are less likely to get or spread COVID-19 during outdoor activities.
- Favor take-away and take-outside options, as possible.
- Wear masks at all times except when you are actively eating or drinking. Masks help protect both you and those around you (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/masks-protect-you-and-me.html>).
- Minimize the time you spend inside. The longer you stay, the more you increase your risk.
- Bring your own food, drinks, plates, cups, utensils and condiment packets, if possible.
- Use single-use options, like salad dressing and condiment packets, and disposable items like food containers, plates and utensils.
- Avoid self-serve and buffet-style food options.
- Use a touchless garbage can, if available.

Source: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/large-gatherings.html>

Gatherings of fully vaccinated people

For your own health and for the safety of your neighbors, I encourage everyone to read the newly published CDC Guidelines for Fully Vaccinated People (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/fully-vaccinated.html>).

People are considered fully vaccinated two weeks after their second dose in a two-dose series, like the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines, or two weeks after a single-dose vaccine, like Johnson & Johnson’s Janssen vaccine.

In response to this update, the following guidance is offered for parish leadership’s discernment:

- The default of all gatherings will continue to be wearing masks and social distancing.
- Although it may be useful to ask, no one is required to report vaccination status to parish leadership. If someone is unable or unwilling to report, the presumption will be that they are not fully vaccinated.
- Small groups (12 or fewer) of fully vaccinated people may gather unmasked.
- Masks must be worn in the presence of unvaccinated people and those at risk for severe illness from COVID-19 (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-with-medical-conditions.html>). Err on the side of wearing masks.

Pictures/video/streaming: Inform and adjust

As people return to worship, please continue your live-streaming practices as much as possible. However, people need to be informed that they may end up in a live stream. The diocesan staff and Council of Trustees are working on a policy and best practices for photo and video release. For now, consider a sign or notice to inform worshippers as they arrive that the service will be streamed, and create areas of your worship space where those wishing may worship without being on camera.

Practice grace and gratitude for clergy and lay leaders

Reintroducing food into our congregational life will take time to plan and do well. Therefore, I ask Episcopalians throughout Kansas to be patient and graceful with clergy and lay leaders as they discern answers to these questions. As long as they are in accordance with this broad-level guidance, I will always support the decisions made in good faith by parish leaders in response to the ongoing pandemic.