



The Episcopal Diocese of Newark

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“Glory to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.” *Ephesians 3:20*

March 10, 2022

Dear Companions on the Journey,

This Sunday marks the second full year of our response as a faithful community to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our journey through pandemic has been long, arduous, and full of unexpected and disruptive changes. Amid fear, worry, and tragedy, God’s steadfast presence has guided, strengthened, and blessed us abundantly.

We have arrived at another change in the pandemic with a significant shift in response to COVID-19. The combination of vaccination protocols, the variety of treatments available for Covid, and the reduced variant infection rates have led to a new metric, **COVID-19 Community Level** ([cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/covid-by-county.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/covid-by-county.html)), for determining infection risk in the current environment.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC), New Jersey Department of Health, and many local health departments have begun to use the **COVID-19 Community Level** which is more focused on hospital admissions and rising immunity levels to determine safety protocols. Thankfully the number of people needing hospitalization or dying from Covid is greatly reduced. While the pandemic is not over, these changes allow healthy and/or vaccinated people to go without a mask.

This is a big change after two years of carefully living with safety protocols. For some this is a simple shift. For others, due to illness, compromised immune systems, or inability to be vaccinated, the choices are complicated. These groups of people will need to continue to observe safety protocols, including using a mask, to protect their health.

I have no doubt that our churches will welcome this change with great joy. I am also heartened by the number of laity and clergy that immediately asked, “How do we support those with fragile health or vulnerable to infection?”

Since May 2021, the decision about whether and how to gather in person has rested with the clergy, wardens, and vestry of each congregation. Our parishes have been nimble and responsive to quickly changing circumstances. They have met in person as often as possible and easily moved to online formats when needed. I expect the same with this new change and if we experience a rise in infection rates from this or any other rapidly moving infectious disease we will adjust as needed.

What do gatherings in church look like now? Clergy, wardens, and vestry are strongly encouraged to follow the process we have used for over a year now:

1. Clergy must assess their own risk tolerance and decide whether to continue wearing masks or begin mask optional worship, meetings, or activities. Clergy must look to their own health and the health of their families as they determine safety protocols.
2. After determining clergy needs, the clergy, wardens, and vestry should consider the needs of vulnerable members of the congregation. The first step in that discernment is asking what members need to continue attending services, paying special attention to vulnerable members.

3. After receiving input from the congregation, clergy, wardens, and vestry should discuss and determine changes to safety protocols and needed adjustments to mitigation factors such as ventilation and sanitizing space.
4. Communicate the plan to the congregation, including options for those needing to continue safety protocols.

The pacing for these steps will be experienced differently in our parishes. I have encouraged parish leadership to make sure all are informed about changes.

The needs of every parish and every parishioner are different. While we will all follow the same process to determine mask guidelines, our parishes will need to make a variety of choices to identify the protocols that meet their specific needs.

We have been tireless in our efforts to make sure that everyone who wanted to attend our worship services has had access and been cared for as a cherished member of our community. This commitment remains the same and I look forward to seeing the creative ways we will find to accommodate the needs of all members.

Pandemic has changed us, our congregations, and our parishes. Pandemic has changed the world we live in. We have become flexible, learned new ways to love our neighbor, and experienced a deepening of our faith. We have become bold in faith, love, and action. All the while, God continues to shape us into the church that is needed now and into a rapidly changing future.

I am grateful for your faithfulness, courage, and ministry to God's people in our parishes and to the surrounding communities we serve. My office is ready to assist with your questions or concerns.

Grace and peace,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Carlye J. Hughes". The signature is written in black ink and is preceded by a small cross symbol.

The Rt. Rev. Carlye J. Hughes
XI Bishop of Newark