



The Episcopal Diocese of Newark

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“I will bless the Lord at all times, and praise will ever be in my mouth.”

Psalm 34:1

Journey Forward Update

May 4, 2021

Dear Companions on the Journey,

We have traveled a long and winding road through pandemic and the host of other issues it brought across our path. What a relief and great joy to reach a turning point that brings long-awaited change. The dramatic lowering of infection rates and the resultant return to in-person gatherings in many places has given us new hope and much-needed respite from a turbulent time. New Jersey, in terms of statewide risk level, has moved from the Red/“Very High Risk” level to the Orange/“High Risk” level on covidactnow.org. Some individual counties, however, remain in that Red/“Very High Risk” level and these risk levels could increase again.

We rejoice because the increase in fully vaccinated people in New Jersey seems to have helped infection rates and new cases to decline. At the same time, we recognize that with 37% of the state fully vaccinated, risk remains high. What does this mean for us? We have discerning and planning to do as we begin to live with COVID-19 as a part of our daily lives.

As our counties continue to move into Orange/“High Risk” levels, parishes may follow the Journey Forward Guidelines for Orange/“High Risk”. Additionally, congregations in Red/“Very High Risk” counties may implement the Orange guidelines, if they have carefully considered their risks and consulted with health officials and their regional church neighbors. Some items to keep in mind:

- At Orange and Red levels of risk, no clergy person is required to be in-person for worship if they have concerns for their own health or well-being or for those in their household.
- Parishes are encouraged to seek input from congregation members as part of planning any in-person gathering for worship. Ask what members need to feel safe in gathering. Listen to concerns and hopes.
- Continue online worship, whether streamed or recorded, for those who cannot attend in person.
- Use all safety protocols in the Journey Forward Guidelines and recommendations or requirements from the CDC and the NJ Department of Health.
- Maximum gathering for indoors and outdoors is 100 persons, as long as 6’ distancing can be maintained.
- Communicate gathering plans to full congregation.
- Remember that services outside remain safer than those indoors.
- Inform the Bishop’s Office of intent to gather by Thursday at 12:00 noon for worship on Sunday using this form: <https://dioceseofnewark.org/form/notice-in-person-worship>.
- If worship includes Holy Communion, those gathered may receive in addition to the Celebrant (still only using bread, in one kind), as per the Orange Level Journey Forward guidelines.

- Prepare the congregation and the space for distancing, masking, and no physical contact.
- Remember that services will need to be shorter (45 minutes or less is the goal).
- No coffee hour gathering following worship. Food and drink should not be served at parish events.
- Plans should include a clear communication plan should an attendee test positive, to ensure that all in attendance are notified.
- Any church with a positive case in attendance at an in-person gathering should suspend in-person gatherings for at least two weeks and will report this news to the Canon to the Ordinary (awright@dioceseofnewark.org) immediately.
- Monthly Communion Under Special Circumstances for those who cannot gather in-person: Communion would be distributed after the service at an outdoor station or by no-contact, distanced home delivery. Follow guidelines for Diocesan Communion under Special Circumstances for distribution (<https://dioceseofnewark.org/liturgical-resource/diocesan-communion-under-special-circumstances>).
- Episcopal visitations will remain online and as the main service through the end of June.
- Additionally, diocesan meetings will continue online through the end of August.

Vaccination status is an important new consideration as we return to in-person gatherings. While we hope that everyone takes advantage of the greater availability of vaccines, **we will not monitor vaccination status in our gatherings**. We are a church that welcomes all of God's people. We will faithfully continue this practice of hospitality which is a vital component of our faith and tradition. Following the public health protocols of distancing, masking, and hand washing remain crucial to offering safe gatherings.

It is natural to turn our immediate attention to the details of gathering. Still, I have encouraged Wardens, Vestries, Clergy, and all who love the church to begin planning *now* for September. Many businesses will recall staff to work in-person, schools plan on in-person learning, and churches will launch the program year. We will need to think differently about the ways we proclaim and teach the faith. It will no longer work for us to remain inwardly focused and reluctant to talk beyond our doors of God's abundant love, compassion, and healing.

How shall we prepare for September while remembering all we have learned and gained this year? Will we allow God to deepen our faith even further? Who do we need to check up on and invite to return? How will we deepen and strengthen relationship with the online community? In what ways will we speak of God's love, mercy, and justice to those who suffer, grieve, or are hopeless? Now is the time to start asking these kinds of questions. My staff and I are available to assist as you explore the new directions God is showing us individually, as church, and as diocese.

Though we do not know what the future will bring, we are certain that our lives have been transformed by God's presence and care during pandemic. We can look for God's continued guidance as we grow into being the church that God desires for us to be now.

Grace and peace,

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Carlye J. Hughes
Bishop of Newark