



The Episcopal Diocese of Newark

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God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. *Psalm 46:1*

Journey Forward Update

March 26, 2021

Dear Clergy and Wardens,

In the midst of new and unfolding challenges, God has continuously guided our path, blessed us with a deepening faith and stronger community, and expanded our capacity to care for the hungry, grieving, lonely, and anxious. I trust God to guide us through the next few months as we wait for greater vaccine availability.

Across the past year of pandemic, we have handled COVID-19 risk reduction practices in a variety of ways. Early on, I made several direct decisions to immediately and drastically limit in-person gatherings, when the impact of the virus was greatest.

In the summer of 2020, the Journey Forward Task Force produced guidelines for congregational gatherings, following best practices on limited gatherings, as the number of cases and infection rate decreased. At that point, the decision regarding gathering in-person was directly given back to congregational leadership, lay and clergy.

In late November, it was clear that the risk for COVID-19 was increasing again, as we saw surges following Halloween and Thanksgiving. I directly limited in-person gatherings again at that time, responding to this urgency, and re-gathered the Journey Forward group to consider guidelines that could adapt to changes in COVID-19 data. In mid-December, they produced a revised set of guidelines, keyed to the risk levels on Covid Act Now (<http://covidactnow.org>), which aggregates data in a local, clear and helpful manner. This way we were all using the same sets of numbers and could assess risk by county, rather than as a blanket across the diocese. *With these revised guidelines, decision-making was again returned to congregational leadership, but tied to reported risk levels in the local county.*

When properly following these revised guidelines, when risk is severe or very high (“Very Red/Red”), gatherings should be very limited, primarily allowing only those persons necessary to stream or record worship. (“Red” or very high risk remains the current situation for all counties in our diocese at this writing.) As risk decreases to high (“Orange”), the procedures from the guidelines, similar to those from Summer/Fall 2020, may be reinstated though no congregation is required or expected to do so.

I do not think that churches should meet in-person when risk levels are at these severe or very high levels (“Very Red/Red” on Covid Act Now). The current daily new case numbers in every county in our diocese represent an active outbreak and are not decreasing. During the month of March, they

have increased. This approach, using Covid Act Now metrics and the related revised Journey Forward Guidelines, is still what I and my office recommend. These guidelines are found at <https://dioceseofnewark.org/covid-19/journey-forward>.

However, it is the choice of the local congregation, through the decisions of your clergy and vestry to follow these guidelines. No data shows that it is safe to gather in-person right now, though there are many in our state government, our towns and cities, and in other religious communities that seem to be choosing otherwise. The increasing numbers create concern that a surge could be imminent.

Please look at CDC and public health data from reliable sources for further nuance. Check with your local health department and infectious disease specialists. Make sure you have a clear understanding of the current rise in new cases and infection rates and resulting risks. Please also make sure that you have a clear understanding of CDC and other recommendations for gatherings or participation in gatherings by individuals who have been vaccinated. I am concerned that we may be tempted to overestimate the protection this provides, especially as infection numbers climb and the risk level continues to climb. Continuing to avoid large gatherings is one of the CDC recommendations for those vaccinated.

Clergy will need to decide *first and foremost* about risk, based on the need for their own health and the health of their families. Clergy and Vestry will only then discuss local risk data. If your clergy and Vestry decide to meet anyway, even if still in the “Red” level on Covid Act Now, you should follow the protocols in the Journey Forward Guidelines identified with the “Orange” level of risk. Be ready to inform my office and your congregation when someone tests positive for COVID-19 or gets sick with coronavirus. If that should occur with someone who has been in attendance in person, you should move to automatically suspend in-person gatherings for 14 days in response.

Nonetheless, I would ask that *all* congregations provide Communion at their discretion once a month to their parishioners. This applies both to those congregations that continue to follow the guidelines as written and not meet in-person while risk levels are at this very high level, as well as to those choosing to make an exception and planning to meet in-person. For those not able to attend in-person because of health concerns, please ensure that a no-contact delivery of communion takes place, following Eucharistic Visitor or Communion under Special Circumstances practices in our Book of Common Prayer, Book of Occasional Services, and Canons along with the guidance that our Diocese has prepared for this practice. Please note that drive-through communion and mailing communion are not permitted.

Guidance for those congregations that continue to observe guideline precautions during Red/Very High Risk:

- Discuss with Vestry and communicate plans to continue online gatherings.
- Continue to maintain practice of 10 or fewer present, all of whom need to be present to accomplish live-streamed or recorded worship.
- When Eucharist is celebrated, only the celebrant should be receiving Communion.
- 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 for distribution. In this case, the celebrant alone would receive Communion during the service, but then be able to distribute it afterwards, outdoors or through home delivery.

Guidance for those congregations who want to consider making an exception to gather during Red/Very High Risk:

- Risk assessment exception – if a priest determines with their household that they are willing to lead in-person worship, even in active outbreak, they may follow these steps prior to an in-person gathering:
 - Consult and read through relevant, credible local data regarding current levels of potential COVID exposure in their community.
 - Discuss with regional colleagues for feedback and to ensure that nearby clergy are aware of your decision.
 - Discuss with Vestry and other key leaders in the congregation.
 - If agreement is reached with clergy and lay leadership to offer in-person gathering, even if contraindicated by risk levels on <http://covidactnow.org>, they will give notice to the Canon to the Ordinary using the webform (<https://dioceseofnewark.org/form/notice-in-person-worship>) by 12 noon on the Thursday prior to the Sunday intended for in-person worship.
 - Worship under this exception will follow the “Orange Level” Journey Forward guidelines for in-person gatherings (These guidelines are found at <https://dioceseofnewark.org/covid-19/journey-forward>) as well as all New Jersey state limitations with the following adjustments:
 - To reduce possible risk, outdoor gatherings for in-person worship should be considered as the primary option wherever possible.
 - The maximum limit for those who could gather outdoors is 75 persons.
 - The maximum limit for those who could gather indoors, if outdoors is not possible, is 50 persons.
 - 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 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) and make provision for streaming or taping for those unable to attend in-person.
 - No coffee hour gathering following worship.
 - Plans should include a clear communication plan if an attendee tests 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 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.

Important to note: Episcopal Visits and Diocesan Meetings remain online in this time of Very High Risk. If I am scheduled for a visit at your parish this program year, it will be at the main worship time and online. Please be prepared for that change if you go ahead with in-person gathering. Additionally, Diocesan Offices will remain closed with the Bishop’s Staff continuing to work from home.

I know these are complicated decisions and will require prayerful consideration. Take the time to discuss, plan, and implement change. Pray all along the way for God’s guidance. Let us know if you need assistance and know that you continue to have my prayers.

Grace and peace,

+ Carlye J. Hughes

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