



Highlights of diocesan news in printable format — April 14, 2021

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From Bishop Hughes

Easter resurrection and transformation in a time of pandemic

This is a transcript from a video message.

Related to this message, see the Bishop's Update on Journey Forward Guidelines (March 2021) appended to this document.

This is Bishop Hughes in the Diocese of Newark, and it is Eastertide. Those great 50 days where we continue to celebrate Easter right up until Pentecost. And during this time of year, during this season, we often hear that we are "Easter people." And it's not just us in the Episcopal Church – preachers all over Christianity are talking right now about how we are Easter people.

And what we're being told, what we can hear when they talk about us being Easter people, is that we're people defined by resurrection. We are defined by the hope and the power and the joy of resurrection. That with that knowledge, we know that always we are connected to God – nothing can separate us from God, right up until death. Nothing can separate us from God. All things are something that God can

overcome in order to be in relationship with us. And even if we find ourselves in that place where we don't feel connected to God and we feel lost and we don't know where God is, all it takes for us is to turn ourselves to God, to turn to God and say, "Here I am, God, please help me." And God will send the help for us.

We are defined by resurrection. And we're defined by transformation. Because resurrection changes everything! So we're a people of great change, a people of great transformation. It's been easy to see that in us, particularly in this time of pandemic. This has been a very long year, a year plus, of incredible change, incredible transformation. And as Easter people that is something that we know.

Here's the challenge for us though – along the 2000 years that we have been celebrating who Jesus is, his life and ministry, we've also figured out a way that we like to do that. And we, like everybody else in the world, have figured out the "right way" to do the things that we like to do. And we don't like changing those things. And this year has taught us about change. There has been nothing – our country, our

workplace, our finances, our homes, our relationships, and yes, our churches – have all been marked by transformation in this year.

I think that's important for us to hold onto as Easter people. Especially right now. It remains a complicated time in pandemic. Infections rates are remaining high. They're starting to come down again, I'm hoping that they continue to go down, but they are quite high at this point. We have some churches that are determined to try and gather right now. We have some churches who are just not ready to do that. We're doing it in different ways, we're all being as safe as we possibly can, and one thing is for sure – it doesn't look anything like how church looked before.

But here we are, during this time of transformation, and not only is God reshaping the church, but God has been reshaping our spiritual lives. We have been transformed in this time. Our faith has become deeper. Our compassion has become wider. We have learned new ways of seeking out the presence of Jesus Christ. And as one person said to me, "I always thought of myself as a faithful person, but I am now a changed person. It's not just that I'm faithful, I have to share what I know with other people. I've got to let them know how much God loves them."

That is what resurrection does for us. That's what happens when we are Easter people. We look at that transformation and we know that is God changing us. That God uses everything around us for resurrection,

including the change we are going through. We will continue to celebrate Easter all throughout Eastertide – and beyond – because we are defined by resurrection. We are defined by transformation. And we are defined by God's love.

Diocesan Announcements

Clergy ministry transitions

Departures

- The Rev. Cathy Rafferty Quinn, Assistant Rector, St. Elizabeth's, Ridgewood - April 25, 2021



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

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