

**STAYING TRUE
IN TIMES OF
UNCERTAINTY
AND NEEDED
CHANGE**

DURING AND POST-COVID PROTOCOL



A MESSAGE FROM THE BISHOP

January 1, 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

The Pandemic continues to rage throughout the world. In looking back over the previous months, I continue to see that in the beginning, we all expected this "thing" to pass in the "not-too-distant" future. A couple of weeks...by Easter...by the 4th of July...by the start of school.... And, the time continued to drag on.

New words enter our daily vocabulary: Zoom, Zoom Fatigue, COVID, COVID Fatigue, Red Counties...Orange Counties...Yellow Counties... And, the list continues to grow.

In the early days, we believed we had to disinfect everything that came into our house, from our groceries to our mail. Today, most people don't seem to be quite as concerned as they once were. However, hand washing still is encouraged, and masks have become part of our daily attire.

When initial protocols were issued for the Diocese of West Virginia, and for other dioceses around The Episcopal Church, we looked at specific metrics to make wise decisions. In reality, those metrics usually were not met.

In the early days, we said reopening of Church buildings would happen when the number of new infections declined for seven consecutive days. The State of West Virginia, and other states, adopted the same metric. But soon, the numbers were rising; states were reopening on a limited basis, without regard to the in-place metrics. Church buildings did the same thing, and I joined in.

On Pentecost, our Church buildings were allowed to reopen, with strict limitations: social distancing, masks, hand sanitizer, attendance, no singing, no common cup/no wine, no passing of the Peace; the list went on. Over the past several months, we continued to try to navigate the waters of this Pandemic. Several vaccines are in place and are being administered across our state.

Hope is on the way, but we still must walk the path that gets us there. So, with the changing landscape, where does that leave us as The Episcopal Diocese of West Virginia? The immediate answer is that not much has changed at this time. But, this guide is intended to help us prepare as we move forward.

Peace,
+WMK

COLOR SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

The following restrictions are in place when a county color appears and is based upon the Harvard University/Brown School of Public Health metrics and coding system. However, NO parish is required to hold in-person services if parishioners feel unsafe. Color coding and what it means to the Church:

RED – If a parish COUNTY is **RED** as determined by the Harvard/Brown measures, "in-person" services and functions are not permitted. Online is approved.

ORANGE – If a parish COUNTY is **ORANGE** as determined by the Harvard/Brown measures, the Vestry and Clergy must have discussion and determine if a safe return to "in-person" services is possible. Stringent protections are to be followed as outlined in this document.

YELLOW – If a parish COUNTY is **YELLOW** as determined by the Harvard/Brown measures, the Vestry and Clergy are to discuss if they wish to have "in-person" services. Protections are to be followed as outlined in this document.

GREEN – If a parish COUNTY is **GREEN** as determined by the Harvard/Brown measures, "in-person" services are permitted, with the safety protocols outlined in this document.

O most mighty and merciful God,
in this time of grievous sickness,
we flee to you for help.

Deliver us,
we ask from our peril;
give strength and skill
to all who minister to the sick;
prosper the means made us for their cure;
and grant that,
perceiving how frail and uncertain our life is,
we may apply our hearts
to that heavenly wisdom
which leads to eternal life,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

NOTE OF IMPORTANCE TO PARISHES

In-Person Services

NO parish is required to hold in-person services if parishioners feel unsafe.

Decision Process

Key discussion points for those who lead our Parishes:

- Does the entire Vestry believe it is safe and secure to begin in-person services? A unanimous vote is required.
- The Parish should go slowly and stay connected.
- It remains better for our Parishes to open a month too late than a day too early.
- It is important that we remain thoughtful and prayerful to know when it is appropriate to return to in-person services.
- The Daily Offices (Morning and Evening Prayer) are acceptable.

During In-Person Services

- All persons, including the priest, must wear a mask.
- The ONLY exception to this would be if the priest is presiding at the service (Daily Office, Eucharist or any other service) and the only other person(s) in the building is the priest's immediate family: spouse, children, domiciled family unit, i.e., those who live under the same roof. If there is one person outside of the priest's immediate family, a mask must be worn.
- Social distancing still is required!
- Limits to the size of gatherings in Church buildings remains restricted to 15 domiciled units.
- Communion in one kind, only. No wine--chalice or common cup.
- Hand sanitizers and other cleaning procedures are required.
- Separate entrances and exits are expected.
- No singing! (Wearing masks does not change this.) There is to be NO SINGING.

What is New and the System for Tracking

Over the months, various entities have devised different models to determine if the number of cases in a county is increasing or decreasing. At one point, it was determined that if an entire dorm at one of our universities had COVID-19, it would only be counted as one case.

After some research, I have chosen to use the Harvard University/Brown School of Public Health metrics and coding system. It appears to be based on cold, hard data with little evidence of any modification.

NOTE OF IMPORTANCE TO PARISHES, CONTINUED

Color System Requirements

- As explained in this document, the following restrictions are in place when a county color appears and is based upon the Harvard University/Brown School of Public Health metrics and coding system. However, NO parish is required to hold in-person services if parishioners feel unsafe. Color coding and what it means to the Church:
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- **GREEN** – If parish COUNTY is **GREEN** as determined by the Harvard/Brown measures, "in-person" services are permitted, with the same safety protocols outlined above.

FURTHER REQUESTS

I am aware that people want to return to their Church buildings; however, I also am aware that at this time, gatherings of almost any size are opportunities for spread of the Virus.

As Children of God, we are called to protect one another and to care for God's Creation – of which we are all a part. This pandemic will end, just not yet.

I ask your continued prayers for our Church, for our Parishes, for God's People and for all those who have died from COVID-19, those who suffer from it, and those who care for us along the way. We pray for healthcare providers, and the list goes on.

As we look toward a post-pandemic life, let us begin to explore how to utilize the gifts we have developed and discovered during this time. Let us ask ourselves: How do we put into action the tools and talents gained to reimagine new and unique ways to serve God and to do his work? Let's not allow the opportunity to be ignored.

O God,
who doest often lead us
by way of the wilderness toward uncertain difficulties
and futures of which we cannot be sure,
help us to trust always in thy guiding purpose
and in the plan that rules our lives.
When we are fearful and inclined to go back,
give us the courage to stand still
and then go forward knowing
that the strength we need
is the strength we will be given.
(Ferris)