



The Episcopal Diocese of Western North Carolina

January 28, 2021

Greetings dear friends,

On Monday, January 25 Episcopal Bishops and their Canons had the privilege of meeting Dr. Francis Collins, the Director of the National Institutes of Health. He is a renowned physician-geneticist noted for his landmark discoveries of disease genes. He shared with us his hopes that “as people of faith, you strongly encourage everyone in your diocese to get one of the Covid-19 vaccines.” Dr. Collins also encouraged us to “be beacons of truth” by advocating for and presenting what we know of the facts.

Here is what we know at this time:

1. Best public health guidelines have always discouraged gatherings with people outside one’s immediate household.
2. When that isn’t possible, it is essential:
 - a. To keep the gathering to the smallest grouping possible.
 - b. All people maintain physical distances of 6 feet or more and refrain from physical contact.
 - c. All people wear masks.
 - d. All people wash their hands regularly.
 - e. It is better to gather outdoors rather than indoors.
 - f. It is strongly recommended to ventilate all inside spaces with fresh air.
 - g. It is strongly recommended to upgrade all ventilation systems with high-grade filters.
 - h. Within the next 6 to 8 weeks the scientific community will have more data to know if a vaccinated individual will or will not be a potential vector of the virus (get and transmit the virus to others while not getting infected themselves).
 - i. The medical and scientific community is fairly confident that there will be enough doses to vaccinate 100 million people by the end of March.

Therefore, after reflecting on both Dr. Collins comments and the current metrics for the 28 counties in our diocese, **I am extending the current restriction for all in-person gatherings until March 1, 2021. After March 1, 2021, I will lift the restriction and allow for limited regathering beginning Sunday, March 7, 2021 while maintaining the following guidelines:**

1. Indoor gathering capacity will be increased to 25 people only in a single confined space, as long as this capacity simultaneously meets the physical distancing requirement below (see #4). If you are not able to meet the distancing requirement, then you must reduce capacity to satisfy that condition.
2. Outdoor gatherings may also be offered with no more than 50 people at a gathering.
3. For all indoor and outdoor gatherings, all people must wear masks.
4. For all indoor and outdoor gatherings, all family groups and individuals ***must be adequately spaced apart at least 6 feet or more. If your space does not adequately allow for 6 feet of physical distancing for every individual or household group, then you can only allow the number of people your particular space will safely accommodate.***

I know that our current situation remains hard for everyone. Personally I, too, would like to regather for worship, prayer, fellowship, and Holy Communion. But above my own personal wishes, I take my responsibility as the pastor for the diocese seriously and want to provide the most comprehensive care for all. As a result, I have wrestled on how to make the best decision for the whole diocese.

My hope had been to return to in-person worship sometime in February. However, after several conversations with local doctors and public health experts, the scientific metrics are still too high in Western North Carolina. While new cases are trending downward from the New Year's Eve peak, the 14 day rolling average for over-all percentage of positive Covid-19 tests is, at this time, greater than 10%. Furthermore, as of January 26, we have vaccinated slightly less than 1% of the population in WNC.

I also believe Good News is on the horizon. In anticipation of increased vaccinations over the next six weeks, additional scientific data about the efficacy of the vaccines in reducing spread, and the hope of a continued declining trend of average percent positive Covid-19 tests, I am truly hopeful that we will be in a better position to offer limited in-person worship in March.

Additionally, I continue to trust clergy and parish leaders to discern what is best for their context. Please know that I will continue to seek-the guidance from public health advisors and closely monitor the situation to determine when any additional changes to our guidelines are warranted. Many of you have reached out to me about where clergy fall in the categories for receiving the vaccine. At this time, the Secretary of Health in the State of North Carolina has not determined the general clergy population as essential workers. I am working to petition the state to consider clergy as essential workers. I will keep you apprised of this particular item as I learn more.

I am also aware of the proximity of Ash Wednesday and the anxiety many clergy feel as we approach another Lent under this pandemic. In response, I have consulted with some of my fellow bishops to learn from them ideas about Ash Wednesday. I offer the following recommendations based on the reflections shared among bishops.

According to the rubrics (BCP, pg. 265), the imposition of ashes is not required in the liturgy. However,

- ❖ I do recognize the yearning of many people in our parishes for tangible and tactile experiences of God's saving love, forgiveness and healing, especially during this pandemic.
- ❖ You may provide:
 - Individual packets of ashes offered to members of your parish before the liturgy and people are invited to impose ashes on themselves or other members of their household.
 - Forego ashes all together.

I recognize that this year, at our virtual Ash Wednesday services, there is a profound opportunity, through our preaching and teaching to equip our people to make the connection between the hard and painful realities of our present context and our faith. I am also aware that there are numerous creative liturgical ideas being cultivated. I invite everyone to connect with your colleagues to discern the best way to meet the pastoral needs of your community.

Finally, I remain grateful for all that you are doing to further the mission and ministry of Jesus in Western North Carolina.

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "José A. McLoughlin". The signature is stylized and cursive.

The Rt. Rev. José A. McLoughlin
Diocese of Western North Carolina