



The Episcopal Diocese of Western North Carolina

May 23, 2021

Dear Friends in Christ,

Two weeks ago the CDC set out updated guidelines, based on significant scientific study, that lessened the safety restrictions for those who are vaccinated against the Covid-19 virus. Governor Cooper followed suit and provided similar guidelines for the State of North Carolina. With few exceptions, fully vaccinated people no longer need to wear masks or maintain physical distance outdoors or indoors. Those few exceptions do not include churches.

I am encouraged by the good news that fully vaccinated adults are protected from severe disease or hospitalization as well as from current Covid-19 variants. Under certain situations, I look forward to being outdoors and in public settings without my mask and the opportunity to greet other vaccinated individuals with an embrace.

However, there are several other factors that I am cognizant of:

- many of our young people have only recently been given access to the vaccine.
- there are still many in our region who are isolated because they have a compromised immune system or respiratory concerns.
- the metrics in North Carolina ([NCDHHS](#)) show that as of May 21, 2021, 52.2% of the adult population has received at least one dose and we have a daily percent positive rate of 4.3%.
- The Episcopal Church motto is “All are Welcome.” We are called to welcome the stranger among us, especially those on the margins. I will not create a two-tier system of how people participate at worship based on vaccination status. Therefore, masks will be required during indoor worship.

As such, I am providing updated guidelines that takes all of this into account. These guidelines go into effect June 6, 2021. Clergy and Vestries are welcome to implement more conservative policies and practices that fit their local parish and county context. My hope is that when more of the general population is vaccinated and there are even lower overall transmission and hospitalization rates, we can lift the remaining restrictions, always barring unforeseen setbacks.

Overall, I encourage the following:

- 1. Please consider hosting as many church-related gatherings outside as often as possible as we work our way toward greater immunity.**
- 2. Please continue to provide masks and hand sanitizer at all gatherings.**
- 3. Please encourage everyone in your communities to get vaccinated so that we can ease the remaining public health mandates.**

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

Faithfully,

The Rt. Rev. José A. McLoughlin

Capacity and Physical Distancing

Indoor spaces	Outside spaces
<p>Clergy and Vestry leadership may consider increasing indoor, in-person gatherings to 100% occupancy capacity.</p> <p><i>This new guideline will stay in effect as long as community transmission and hospitalizations are at low indices.</i></p> <p><i>These new guidelines are best implemented when indoor spaces are well ventilated either with fresh air or upgraded HVAC systems with high-grade filters.</i></p> <p><i>Should the wider community experience a surge, the diocese may re-implement greater physical distancing requirements.</i></p>	<p>Outside, in-person gatherings no longer have any capacity limitations.</p> <p>Everyone is strongly encouraged to monitor their local environment, especially when there is substantial or high community transmission.</p> <p>Likewise, everyone is encouraged to practice greater physical distancing of more than 3 feet in larger crowds. Clergy and Vestries may define what constitutes a large gathering for their context and space density.</p>

Masks

Indoor spaces	Outside spaces
<p>Mask use is required for all in-door worship regardless of vaccination status. Please post a sign indicating this requirement for indoor gatherings.</p> <p>Clergy and Vestries <i>may</i> lift mask requirements for small gatherings <i>if</i> all persons are vaccinated. Clergy and Vestries may define what constitutes a small gathering for their context and space density. These guidelines are safest when indoor spaces are well ventilated.</p>	<p>No masks are required.</p> <p>In our commitment to decrease viral spread, for all outside, in-person gatherings, unvaccinated individuals are strongly encouraged to wear masks.</p>
<p>Clergy/laity when preaching/reading at the lectern/pulpit may remove their mask while at the pulpit/lectern if there are no persons within 10 feet of the preacher/reader.</p>	

Holy Eucharist (both indoor and outside spaces)

Use of the common cup is not allowed. Should clergy and Vestries desire, wine may be offered by intinction by the clergy. Clergy are encouraged to use hand sanitizer, tongs or gloves in the administration of Holy Communion.

The customary passing of the peace may be resumed. Please be sensitive to the social cues given by those sitting around you. While some may be ready for a handshake or embrace, others may not. Let's work gently into this ritual.

Social gatherings may resume. Unvaccinated people are strongly encouraged to wear masks before and after consuming refreshments/food.

Congregational Singing and Choirs

Indoor spaces

Outside spaces

<p>Congregational singing is now allowed with the following mandatory requirements:</p> <p>All people must wear masks.</p> <p>These guidelines are in effect regardless of vaccination status.</p>	<p>Congregational singing is allowed.</p> <p>Unvaccinated people are strongly encouraged to continue wearing masks.</p>
<p>If all choir members are vaccinated, the priest and Vestry may allow the choir to sing without masks.</p>	

[Cleaning \(CDC Report 4/5/2021\)](#)

Indoor spaces

Outside spaces

<p>Church spaces do not need to be professionally sanitized. Rather, provide clean and well-ventilated spaces.</p> <p>It is always a good idea to regularly clean (with soap and water or disinfecting cleaning solutions) frequently touched objects.</p>	<p>No cleaning required.</p> <p>You are encouraged to consider wiping down chairs used for outdoor worship if you have more than one worship service on a Sunday.</p>
--	---

Use of Worship Books

Indoor spaces

Outside spaces

<p>Since surface transmission infection is remote (1 in 10,000), Prayer Books, Hymnals and Bibles may be put back in pews for use.</p> <p>If your church holds more than one worship service on a Sunday, please consider wiping down all books in between services or using paper bulletins.</p> <p>If your church holds only one worship service on a Sunday, there is no need to wipe down books.</p>	<p>Since surface transmission infection is remote (1 in 10,000), Prayer Books, Hymnals and Bibles may set out for use.</p> <p>If your church holds more than one worship service on a Sunday, please consider wiping down all books in between services or using paper bulletins.</p> <p>If your church holds only one worship service on a Sunday, there is no need to wipe down books.</p>
--	--