



## *The Episcopal Diocese of Western North Carolina*

January 5, 2022

Dear Beloved in Christ,

As we continue to live into our new normal with the ever-evolving recommendations for regathering as a community, I want to share with you some observations of where we are as a diocese as well as my latest guidelines.

First, it is clear that the new Omicron variant of the Covid-19 virus is now the dominant strain and it is extremely contagious. At this time, 69% of the adult population is fully vaccinated and the daily percent positive test rate in North Carolina is now 27.4%.

Likewise, we know that children younger than 5 years old are not able to be vaccinated and there will always be adults that are immune-compromised, and all need extra protection and care.

The good news is that we also know if a person is vaccinated, while they could still get infected, they are much more protected from serious illness, hospitalization and death. The other piece of good news is that, utilizing other public health tools, including masks, we can continue adapting and learning to live in new ways, even as the Covid-19 virus shifts from being a pandemic to an endemic reality.

With all of these observations in mind, and after consultation with local medical and public health advisors as well as conversations with other area Bishops, I want to provide you with some short-term requirements and recommendations.

- While the majority of parishes in the diocese have voluntarily continued to require masks, **I am now reinstating a mandatory mask requirement for all indoor church gatherings for the next month, until February 6, 2022.**
- Every clergy person in charge of a church and Vestry is strongly encouraged to remain vigilant and aware of the Covid-19 metrics in their local contexts as this will continue to provide additional helpful information as leadership bodies discern what is best for their church community.
- While **I am not** reintroducing a physical distancing requirement, **I strongly encourage** each parish leadership team to continue to assess and assure that your church spaces are adequately ventilated.

- I will talk directly with church leaders prior to my visitations during the month of January to gauge where each community is in relation to the current Omicron surge and plan accordingly.

Please know that I will continue to support our Clergy and Vestries, working with others as they see fit, to develop and implement plans for worship, fellowship and formation in their own congregation. As you can imagine, each parish setting is different, and I trust each leadership team to do what is best for their community.

Finally, know that we will continue to assess the situation and as always, please reach out to me with any questions that I can address for you and your leadership.

I remain grateful for each of you and the ways you continue to serve God's people in Western North Carolina.

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "José A. McLoughlin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "M".

The Rt. Rev. José A. McLoughlin  
Bishop