



A Letter to Clergy of the Diocese

May 18, 2021

Dear Clergy of the Diocese,

We have reached a moment we have long anticipated, when COVID-19 cases have declined as vaccination rates have risen. This reality has led Governor Northam to lift the mask mandate in Virginia for those who have been fully vaccinated. In addition, distancing requirements and capacity limits will be lifted on May 28. Suddenly, groups in Virginia may regather far faster than we anticipated! We celebrate this news, giving thanks to God. We also remember the nearly 600,000 people who have died from COVID-19 in the United States. May they rest in peace and rise in glory.

When the pandemic began, I placed limitations on our worshipping in person and gathering together in our church facilities other ways. I did so because of our shared Christian commitment to loving our neighbor and protecting the most vulnerable among us. I have greatly appreciated your faithfulness in abiding by those restrictions for the sake of the health of the entire community. Now, as the pace of regathering picks up, the time is near for me to release you from those restrictions.

As of today, churches no longer need to submit a plan for regathering. However, if you would like to talk through your regathering plans or if you have questions, please write to bishopsoffice@thediocese.net.

Effective May 28, you are free and empowered to make the best decisions for your congregation about regathering for worship and holding other in-person activities, including Christian formation programs for children, youth and adults. I trust you completely and without reservation as you do the ministry you were called and ordained to do. As of May 28, you may begin to regather without distance and capacity restrictions, as you and your congregation are ready. If you are not yet ready to regather indoors and in-person, you have my full support in that decision as well.

Please monitor two things going forward: [public health markers](#) and guidance from civic authorities, including the CDC, the Virginia Health Department and the Governor of Virginia. Please continue to adjust your practices when necessary as new information emerges.

There are a few areas in which I ask you to continue to exercise particular care and restraint.

WORSHIP

Think carefully about what you will require regarding masks. According to the CDC, those who are fully vaccinated no longer need to wear masks in every indoor setting. Remember, though, that just over one third of Virginians are fully vaccinated, and children under the age of 12 are not

eligible to be vaccinated. How will you protect those who are not vaccinated? How will the congregation continue to model care for those who are vulnerable? Although I am fully vaccinated, I will continue for the time being to wear a mask indoors during parish visitations, removing it only while actively leading worship and preaching.

Until we have more information, please continue to refrain from using the common cup and a common loaf of bread during the Eucharist. I ask that you continue to offer communion in one kind (bread only) for the time being. When we learn more from health officials, I will advise you further.

As you move toward worshipping together in person, please consider how you might continue virtual worship in order to include those who do not yet feel safe coming to Church, and those who have connected with the Church during the pandemic.

MUSIC/SINGING

Recent CDC guidelines tell us that singing indoors by fully vaccinated people is a safe activity. Therefore, singing is once again permitted by choirs and congregations, as you feel comfortable. Those who are not vaccinated remain at risk, so you may choose to ask everyone to wear masks when singing. You might also encourage all choir members and members of the congregation to be vaccinated as soon as possible. The more people who are vaccinated, the safer all of us are in church. It is also within your authority as rector, vicar or priest-in-charge to require persons to be vaccinated in order to sing in the choir. I recommend that you do so, but leave it to your discretion.

COFFEE HOUR/ FOOD AND DRINKS

In addition to singing, we have missed gathering after church for informal conversation and social gatherings. Coffee hour and other activities with food and drinks may resume. Please think carefully about how food and drinks are served. For now, avoiding potlucks and offerings where many people touch the same food and utensils seems prudent. The safest options are individually served items.

PASTORAL CARE

Please use your best judgement when it comes to making in-person pastoral care visits. You are the best person to decide when a visit can be safely made in-person (indoors or outdoors) and when a visit is best by telephone or video call. Trained and vaccinated Lay Eucharistic Visitors who wish to do so may resume making visits, bringing much comfort to those who need it. Hospitals, nursing homes and other medical care settings continue to require masks. If visiting someone who is not vaccinated, a mask must be worn.

PUBLIC HEALTH MARKERS

For many months now, the Diocese of Virginia has used Brown University's School of Public Health COVID Dashboard (found [here](#)) to guide our decision-making about regathering. Please continue, on a weekly basis, to monitor the COVID-19 cases on your county and adjust your practices accordingly:

If your county is **GREEN** (fewer than 1 case per 100,000), you are on track for containment of COVID. You may hold events indoors or outdoors. There are no limits on what type of event you may hold. Masks for those who have been vaccinated are not required.

If your county is **YELLOW** (between 1 and 9 cases per 100,000), there is some community spread of COVID in your county. You may hold events indoors or outdoors, following Virginia guidelines. However, we ask that you use caution. Since not all people are vaccinated, we suggest the use of masks indoors for all attendees, unless it is a small group (like a bible study or a staff meeting) and everyone has been vaccinated. You may want to require people to wear masks when singing and encourage attendees to maintain physical distance.

If your county is **ORANGE** (between 10 and 24 cases per 100,000), there is accelerated community spread of COVID in your county. You may hold events, following Virginia guidelines. At this risk level, outdoor events are safer than indoor events. I strongly suggest requiring the use of masks for all attendees indoors and maintaining physical distance of at least 6 feet. You should consider not serving food at events.

If your county is **RED** (25 or more cases per 100,000), there is accelerated community spread of COVID in your county. At this level, in-person events are discouraged and outdoor events are encouraged. Everyone should wear a mask and physical distance of at least 6 feet is strongly suggested. Events where food is served are strongly discouraged.

This letter does not cover every nuance or circumstance of your ministry but, as I stated earlier, I trust you to use your best judgment. I know that you will follow public health markers and civic guidelines and do what is best for God's people. As civic guidelines continue to relax, please feel empowered to regather as you feel is safe. Don't ever hesitate to reach out when you need guidance or support for the decisions you are making. Write to bishopsoffice@thediocese.net.

I am grateful to each of you for your hard work during these last fifteen months. I also recognize that these changes will mean even more hard work for you. You and your congregations remain in my prayers.

God bless you. God bless us all as the journey continues.

Faithfully yours,

+ *Susan E. Goff*

FOR CHRIST. FOR THIS TIME. FOR ALL TIME.



