



September 14, 2021  
Clergy Call

**Bishop Goff's Remarks:**

**Protocols for clergy and congregations  
during the surge of the Delta variant of the Coronavirus**

This continues to be a difficult season, when we have to pivot from week to week, even from day to day. I have visited a number of congregations in a number of different contexts over the past few weeks. I witness that you are doing a remarkable job under trying circumstances to continue the life of worship while keeping people safe. I recognize the cost of this work to you and your families. On this Holy Cross Day, I recognize the crosses that have been placed in your paths and that you have taken up, the sacrifices you continue to make and the tremendous gifts that you continue to give. Thank you.

So what about our COVID protocols for right now, in this time of the Delta variant surge?

As of this morning, every county in our Diocese is in the red or orange zone for the rate of new infections, according to the metrics from the Brown School of Public Health to which we have been referring since the pandemic began. Most areas are in the significant to high zones for transmissibility.

To protect one other, especially children, and to protect ourselves, we will continue to follow the protocols that we named in early August. These are:

**Masking at all times when indoors.** If there is sufficient distancing, you may allow the preacher or readers to remove masks while speaking. I wear a mask while celebrating the Eucharist and strongly recommend that you do the same.

**Distancing** – Continue to maintain a distance of at least three feet in every direction between households or individuals.

**Timing** – Because the risk of infections increases with the length of time that people are gathered together indoors, streamline indoor worship and other activities as possible and appropriate. For worship this could include one reading instead of two before the Gospel, fewer hymns, or shorter announcements and sermon.

**Outdoor Worship** – The risk is lower when groups gather outside. As the weather is changing, consider outdoor worship. Masks are optional during outdoor worship.

**Communion** – Continue current practices of safe distribution of the sacrament. Communion in one kind – bread only – remains the safest practice in most settings. Refrain from use of the common cup of wine until the threat of the coronavirus is past.

**Congregational singing** – Your call on this. Congregations may sing, with everyone in the congregation masked. Because it is difficult to sing with a mask, consider singing shorter hymns or fewer verses of hymns. This will also help with moderating the length of the service.

**Receptions** – Since eating requires the removal of masks, indoor receptions should not take place. Outdoor receptions may occur.

**Other meetings in the buildings** – Follow the same protocols for masking and distancing.

**Schools in the buildings** – Follow protocols of the Virginia Health Department and your local health department. All students, teachers and others at the school must wear masks inside.

**COVID cases** – If you or a staff member get COVID-19 or test positive, whether you have symptoms or not, the best practice is to close the office for the quarantine period. If a member of the congregation who was at the worship the week before gets COVID-19 or tests positive, follow the guidelines we sent out and posted last week. A suspension of in person worship and a return to online worship during the quarantine period is the best practice, so consider your options carefully.

**Vaccinations** – Vaccinations are our surest line of defense against the coronavirus. If you have not already been vaccinated, get the vaccine as soon as possible. Teach your congregations about the importance of vaccinations, tell them the story of your vaccination and encourage vaccinations in the strongest possible terms.

If we gather in person for Diocesan Convention in November, all attendees will be required to be vaccinated or present a negative test result before attending. Please let your delegates know this as soon as possible. The decision about whether Convention will be in person or virtual will be made by the end of September.

All clergy attending the clergy retreat at Shrine Mont in October should be vaccinated before coming.

Rectors, vicars or priests in charge have the authority to require that all church staff members be vaccinated before coming to the office. You have the authority to require, for example, that all choir members be vaccinated before they attend rehearsals or sing in church. We have not had to require vaccinations for diocesan staff since all got the vaccination voluntarily.

The Episcopal Church, like every other mainstream denomination, does not recognize a religious exemption from vaccinations. We, in fact, encourage vaccinations as a way of protecting the community. Therefore, no clergy person may sign a religious exemption letter for anyone.

Vaccines are the front lines of this struggle against illness. Get vaccinated and work to get others vaccinated.

A question that has come forward a number of times is whether we will suspend in person worship in all churches again at any point. There are so many moving pieces and so many unknowns about this virus that it is not possible to answer this definitively right now. If we get to the point where schools close again, or the Governor places restrictions again on the size of indoor or outdoor gatherings, we will adjust our protocols accordingly. In the meantime, you continue to have authority to make decisions about worship. Please, let's all follow the protocols that are in place so that we can do our part in avoiding an across the board suspension of worship.

## **Q & A**

*Can choirs rehearse together and sing masked if the choir members are all vaccinated?*

That's your call. If you feel it's safe, yes, you may do that.

*Do we have authority to ask parishioners for proof of vaccination or a negative COVID test?*

Yes, you have that authority. Think it through very carefully. It might be a good conversation to have with churches in your region since your COVID metrics are likely at similar levels.

*If the diocesan convention will be held at the Marriott, will it be a hybrid convention for those who are unable to be in large groups or feel unsafe?*

If we do meet in person, it will not be hybrid. At this point, we don't have the technology infrastructure to do a hybrid convention well. But we're aware that some people will not feel safe and that is being factored into our conversations about Convention.

*Should our choir be masked to sing at outdoor services? Our parishioners?*

You can mask or distance. One or the other will suffice.

*Must vaccinated soloists or duets sing masked?*

Yes.