



## Summary of Clergy Call January 11, 2022

Opening Prayer

### **Bishop Goff's remarks** (Q & A follows)

Happy New Year! Our original plan for this clergy call, which we named six weeks ago, was to talk about the year ahead, in which we will elect and consecrate the 14th Bishop Diocesan of the Diocese of Virginia. I will say a bit about that, but what is first and foremost on the minds of most of us is the continuing COVID-19 pandemic and the Omicron surge.

As of this morning, every county in Virginia is in the RED zone for new infections, and in the RED for transmissibility. This has led my colleague in Southern Virginia, Bishop Susan Haynes, to suspend in-person worship and gatherings in the Episcopal churches of that diocese for the month of January. Some other dioceses across the country have done the same, though no others adjacent to us.

At this point in the pandemic, I am not establishing a one-size-fits-all response. While all of our congregations are in areas that are in the RED, there are sufficient differences from one congregation to the next that I continue to support you in making your best decision locally. Some of those differences include:

- The average age of those who come to worship
- The size of the worship space and the ability to distance
- The comfort level of the clergy and/or congregation with gathering in person
- The decisions of other organizations in the community - schools, restaurants, hospitals and businesses.

Many of our congregations have suspended in-person worship for a time this month, offering live-streamed, Zoom or other virtual worship again. Others are continuing with smaller, shortened in-person services. And many are offering hybrid worship, with in-person and virtual both as options for the same service.

Dr. Fauci and Dr. Walenski each say that this surge has not yet reached its peak, and that a million new infections a day may happen soon. And, they say, we have good reason to hope that the surge will peak and then rapidly decline around the end of this month. We pray that we experience the same kind of rapid decline as was experienced in South Africa.

In the meantime, we must continue to exercise restraint, especially for the sake of the most vulnerable in our communities. For that reason, a few basic expectations remain in place:

- Everyone who comes into a church building must be masked at all times while indoors.
- Physical distance of at least 3 feet must be maintained between individuals or family groups at all times.
- We continue to refrain from use of the common cup.

In addition, please encourage people to be vaccinated in the strongest terms possible. It is the vaccine that makes our decisions now different from earlier in the pandemic. It is the vaccine that allows us breathing room for making local decisions. The vaccine is the game changer. Even though breakthrough cases among people who been vaccinated are on the rise, the majority of hospitalizations and deaths occur among non-vaccinated persons. Get the vaccine and encourage others to do the same.

What's next?

Will there be another variant?

When will we move from the crisis level of pandemic to a more daily reality of endemic?

What will the new normal be after pandemic?

Will people come back to church the way they did before the pandemic?

What is going to happen?

There are so many questions we can't answer. So we as clergy keep going to our time-tested tool box.

- We pray, always and everywhere. We lift our fears and our hopes to God. We lift our leaders and all God's people to God. We pray for God's will and for our courage to do it.
- We consult with one another, asking questions and listening for answers.
- We consult with experts. Most of us are generalists, so we need to get information from experts in a wide variety of areas, from worship to finance to group dynamics.
- We lead faithfully and honestly, leading with love, putting the needs of the most vulnerable first.
- We stay in relationship with our spiritual directors, therapists, colleague groups and partners in ministry. None of us can do this on our own. We need one another. We need others.
- We keep breathing. And exercising. And eating right. And sleeping well. And playing. And hanging out with the dog or with grandkids or with friends.

This has been hard. We entering into a third year of hard stuff. With can do this, with God's help; with the amazing encouragement of the reading we heard and preached on Sunday:

Isaiah 43:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.  
For I am the Lord your God,  
the Holy One . . . your Savior.  
. . . you are precious in my sight,  
and honored, and I love you,  
So Do not fear, for I am with you.

Before we turn to a brief Q and A, I share a few notes about the coming year in our Diocesan life.

The calendar is full. We have plans - do we ever have plans! How will the pandemic affect them? We don't know. So we continue planning on parallel tracks.

The Search Committee and the Transition Committee are hard at work moving toward the election of the 14th Bishop Diocesan of the Diocese of Virginia. That election will take place on Saturday, June 4. We are planning to hold it in person at St. George's Church in Fredericksburg. Should we not be able to gather in person, we will hold the Electing Convention virtually. We've learned a lot through three virtual conventions about how to do it effectively. Other dioceses have held electing conventions virtually and we are learning from their experiences as well. We pray that we don't have to act on such learning and that we will gather in person.

Leading up to the day of the election, opportunities are being planned for the people of the diocese to meet the candidates. You can find a link to all election related dates and activities on the Bishop Search website: [www.virginiabishopsearch.org](http://www.virginiabishopsearch.org).

God willing, the newly elected bishop will be consecrated somewhere in this Diocese on Saturday, December 3.

Between the election and consecration, we will have our Annual Convention, plus the full round of other annual activities, including the spring and fall gatherings at Shrine Mont. The General Convention of The Episcopal Church will meet in Baltimore in July. The Lambeth Conference of Bishops will meet in Canterbury, England, in August. All will be adjusted if needed depending on the pandemic. All will provide opportunities for loving service in the Church and in the wider world. We will be stretched and we will be blessed in the coming year in ways we can't yet imagine. God is good, and God is with us through it all. Thanks be to God.

## **Q & A with Bishop Goff**

### **When is Spring Clergy Retreat?**

It is May 2-4. This conference includes spouses and lay professionals. The theme will be how to talk about race – how to have honest, courageous conversations.

### **Would you consider making a blanket decision to suspend in-person worship?**

I've considered it. There may come a time when we do that again. In talking with clergy in a number of settings, I made the determination not to have one-size-fits-all approach because of different circumstances in different locales. Many have made the decision to suspend in person worship. I encourage you to consider that very seriously in your locations.

### **Should we look at hospital capacity numbers locally and where do we find that information?**

Transmissibility numbers don't mean what they once did with Omicron. So hospitalizations could be an important metric. Here are a few good sources:

[CDC COVID hospitalizations Data Tracker](#)

[NPR Tracker Tool](#)

[COVID-19 Hospitalization Tracking Project | Carlson School of Management \(umn.edu\)](#)

### **What markers or thresholds will you look for to consider lifting holds on indoor eating and drinking in church buildings?**

Our hope is that we begin to move from pandemic to endemic, that could be revisited. Dr. Fauci suggests we will be in the endemic phase for a long time and that we would shift from the primary focus of avoiding the virus to learning how to live with the reality of it. I hope a month from now we can answer more clearly the question of indoor eating. There is an excellent article on the transition from pandemic to endemic in *The Atlantic*: [Omicron Is Forcing Us to Rethink Mild COVID](#)

### **Can you provide an update on the Transition Minister search?**

We've received a pool of applications for Interim Transition Minister. We're are pleased with what has come in and are beginning initial contact for interviews. In the meantime, we have parallel tracks so that churches already in transition or moving toward a transition will not be dropped and no one will fall through the cracks.