



Clergy Call Summary February 8, 2022

Bishop Goff began the meeting with prayer then gave opening remarks, which were followed by a presentation by Diocesan Chancellor JP Causey. Mr. Causey addressed masking in our church schools in light of Governor Youngkin's executive order and the blocking of that order by an Arlington judge last week.

Announcements for diocesan Treasurer Ted Smith

Mr. Smith noted four important items, all of which are detailed [here](#) on the diocesan website.

1. Church Pension Group now has a **clergy tax preparation guide** for 2021 returns.
2. Application for **scholarships for clergy children** are now available.
3. A **federal reporting guide for Episcopal churches** for things like W2s and W9s.
4. **PAROCHIAL REPORTS:** A link to forms and instructions for completing parochial reports. They are **due March 1**. If you have questions regarding submitting parochial reports, please contact [Ted Smith](#) as soon as possible.

Bishop Goff's Remarks (Q & A follows)

On Friday we marked the tragedy of 900,000 lives lost to COVID-19. This illness continues to take precious lives. God bless us as we mourn. God bless the souls of the departed.

We've heard in the news yesterday and today that some states are preparing to lift masking mandates next month as the rate of new infections plummets. Those states are all in the north where COVID began and peaked earlier than in

Virginia. We trust that we will follow that trajectory and begin to see a significant decline in new infections soon.

In fact, it was reported in the Richmond Times Dispatch on Saturday that COVID cases and hospitalizations are falling in Virginia, but deaths are not falling yet. This is normal, epidemiologists tell us, since there is a lag in deaths due to the nature of the disease, the time it takes to investigate and report deaths, and the time it takes for death certificates to be processed. We have reason to hope that the death rate will soon begin to fall.

We continue to see clear evidence that COVID-19 remains the greatest threat to those who have not been vaccinated, through those who have been vaccinated and boosted do become infected. Only 64% of Americans are vaccinated. Please continue to urge your people to take the vaccine and encourage others to do the same.

Given the hope we are experiencing, the promise on the horizon and our commitment to protecting the most vulnerable, including children under 5 who cannot yet be vaccinated, we continue with our recent protocols. A revised [letter](#) from me has been posted on the diocesan website.

Masking continues to be the wise course and I ask you to expect it from your congregations for a while longer. We pray that, this time, it will truly be only a while longer. I **ask** you to do this. Please hear that language for what it is. You have authority to make the decision in your specific and local context. That decision will not necessarily be one size fits all. The decision should take into account all of the factors you know about:

- the age and vaccination status of members of the congregation;
- the parallel decisions of the local school board;
- the advice of the health department and the CDC;
- discussion with medical professionals in your congregation and community;
- infection, transmission, hospitalization and death rates in your county or city;

- recognition that masking is the best and surest defense against infections, and that masking will likely be the norm in some settings, including medical settings, for the foreseeable future.

Two related data points:

1. We continue to require masking and distancing for staff and visitors at our diocesan offices.
2. For now, your bishops will be masked **during all visitations**. Please let your people know that they are to be masked when indoors for worship or meetings with the bishop. Whatever you might do at other times, the bishops require masking when we are present - for a while longer. We are in and out of so many settings, connecting with so many communities - and we don't want to be spreaders of the disease or risk being infected ourselves.

We remain hopeful. I remain hopeful. And we remain committed to protecting one another by not letting our guard down too soon.

As to the wine of communion, I've seen congregations do it well in ways that honor or theology of one cup and that keep everyone safe. Smaller congregations are doing it particularly well. You may continue to experiment and try some things, or refrain from sharing the wine for a while longer.

I now invite chancellor JP Causey to speak about masking and schools.

Presentation by Diocesan Chancellor JP Causey

Note: Mr. Causey opened his remarks with a disclaimer that clergy of the Diocese are not his clients so what he says today is not legal advice to a client, but rather informational.

The Governor's order regarding masking in schools is unclear and there are multiple lawsuits filed, two of which have been decided, primarily on procedural technicalities.

Executive Orders are not laws. It is not within the Governor's power to make laws. Executive Order 2 is being interpreted by many to be permissive, not mandatory. The Order gives schools discretion to require masks or not.

There's an open question as to whether the Executive Order applies to private schools, especially religious private schools, such as preschools in church settings.

What is clear: Schools have a duty to follow rules from the state and local Health Departments and the CDC, both of which currently recommend masking in schools.

Subject to advice from your local counsel, if your church is running a preschool, I feel that you are within your rights to require students to wear masks. However, this is a very fluid situation from a legal and health standpoint. I think it will continue to change very rapidly. Keep checking your local news sources. At this point, the Bishop's current advice as to masks for worship in churches probably applies to preschools.

Q and A

Do you have recommendations around congregational singing?

Some congregations have only a soloist singing and others also have congregational singing. Keep being attentive to how you protect your people. At this point singing while masked is best.

Can you give examples of how wine is being distributed during Eucharist?

A few congregations are having the celebrant consecrate a flagon and then the wine is poured into small cups for distribution.

What about imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday?

In a setting where people are masked, I encourage you to make your decision about that. We are doing confirmations and baptisms where the amount of time we're close together is a short enough window that research suggests it is safe. This would apply to imposition of ashes as well.

Do you have advice about Lenten Suppers and other events?

Do your best and most careful thinking about how to keep everyone safe. Should a sharp decline in cases happen in the next weeks, I think opportunities to open to have indoor receptions with food will be much safer.

Bishop Goff's Closing Remarks

Before Ash Wednesday, we will communicate with you again and we look forward to an Easter that is more fulsome in terms of being together in person than we've had in two years. May it be so.

Next month's clergy call will take place March 8 at 4:00 and our topic will center on racial justice and healing and how we move forward with Resolutions R4 and R10 as adopted by the November 2021 diocesan Annual Convention.