

Guidance for Congregations from the Task Force for Re-entering, Re-opening, and Re-imagining for the Diocese of New Jersey

October 6, 2022

*“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; **abide** in my love.” John 15:9*

In preparation for Jesus’s earthly departure, he instructed his disciples to abide, or remain steadfast, in his love. While it seems like a simple directive, we know it is not an easy one to follow. And yet we know the answer to any problem, issue or situation is to seek the way of love.

We have navigated this season of pandemic rooted in love, and as we look toward the future, that is still our guiding principle. All our decisions and actions have been achieved through our Christian covenant to love one another as we are loved, and we need to make sure our good work abides as well.

As of today, the CDC has **not** stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has become endemic. The RRR Task Force continues to encourage all congregations to use best practices that keep their communities as safe as possible, and not just from COVID-19. Flu season is starting, and as cold weather drives people indoors, we will see an influx of other communicable diseases. We need to remain mindful of protecting the most vulnerable in our midst. We strongly encourage that all members of the Diocese of New Jersey get all vaccines (COVID, flu, shingles, DPT, etc.) their health care provider recommends they receive. We also encourage developing and implementing a thorough preventative medicine/wellness plan with your health care provider, as the best defense against illness is being healthy in body and mind from the start. This is how we abide in Jesus’s love.

Our sincere hope is that the RRR Task Force has offered congregations ways to navigate the road ahead. The specific context of each community will direct how best to respond to local circumstances with the tools and considerations you have developed and used over the past two and a half years. This is important information to maintain and retain, as another global health crisis is likely to occur within a decade.

The following recommendations will be the final report of the RRR Task Force. We have been honored to support our Diocese during these challenging times and are confident we have fulfilled our intended purpose. Now it is time for us to abide in Jesus’s love, trusting we have what we need even if, like the first disciples, we do not feel confident we can do it on our own. You are not left comfortless. If your community needs some guidance in this area, Dr. Canon Phil Lewis and the Rev. Canon Valerie Balling remain available for support.

May Christ’s loving Spirit guide us in all things as we abide in God’s abundant love.

This document provides a reference for precautionary measures against the transmission of airborne viruses such as COVID-19, to guide congregations in making choices appropriate to the particular needs and situation of their own community.

As of the publication of this guidance (October 2022) the CDC is publishing county-by-county Community Risk Levels for COVID-19 at: <http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/covid-by-county.html>

The Community Risk Level information and additional data may also be found at: http://covidactnow.org/us/new_jersey-nj/

Congregations are encouraged to use those resources while they are available, or similar risk information published by reputable sources, to determine local risk level when considering precautions against the transmission of airborne viruses.

When planning precautions against airborne viruses, congregations should keep in mind that:

- Masking is more effective at reducing transmission risk than distancing or sanitizing surfaces and hands.
- Improving ventilation is an important tool for reducing transmission risk in indoor gatherings, and congregations with buildings that are not well ventilated may wish to consider other precautions more strongly.
- Singing, and other activities that require an individual to project their breath, pose a higher risk of transmission to those nearby than ordinary speaking or non-speaking activities.

GUIDANCE APPROPRIATE AT ANY TIME

- Regular washing or sanitizing of hands is generally encouraged for all, especially those who prepare the altar for worship, and those who lead worship and offer the sacraments for the church.
- Encourage all who can be vaccinated to get vaccinated against transmissible disease in order to care for the whole Body of Christ and for the whole human community.
- Encourage those experiencing symptoms of transmissible illnesses (generally fever and respiratory or digestive symptoms) to refrain from attending in-person gatherings of the congregation while experiencing symptoms, whether those symptoms seem to be COVID-19 or not.
- Congregations are recommended to follow public health guidance that may be issued regarding physical precautions, limits on size, duration, or frequency of gatherings, and to support and comply with any contact tracing efforts, even if public health guidance specifically exempts houses of worship.
- Any individual may choose to wear a face mask at any time and should not be questioned about their reasons for doing so. Many may choose to continue to mask at church gatherings out of care for others, or the desire for additional protections for themselves.
- Congregations are encouraged to adopt extra precautions, if necessary, to allow individuals to receive the sacraments and services of the Church without the burden of worry about infectious transmission.
- When planning worship and gatherings, congregations should be attentive to ensuring equitable access for those who may be at higher-than-average risk from communicable diseases.
- Congregations should make any requirements for masking or other precautions clear for all visitors, worshippers, members, and guests.

GUIDANCE FOR LOW LOCAL RISK

Few precautions other than those noted above are likely to be necessary at this level.

GUIDANCE FOR MODERATE TO HIGH LOCAL RISK

Masking should be required for gatherings associated with worship or ministries of the congregation which involve members of the community not eligible for vaccination.

Ministries of the church, or tenants using church buildings, who operating under state and local licensing, should follow the guidance of their authorizing agencies. If those precautions differ substantially from those adopted by the congregation, it may be wise to limit the interaction or shared space use between the congregation and the tenant community.

Clergy should consult with participants in special liturgies, such as marriages and baptisms, about their comfort level when near others not of their household or immunological bubble and should offer precautions in the liturgy appropriately.

- Care should be taken to use the precautions desired by the most cautious person whose participation in the liturgy is required (e.g., if a parent or sponsor of a candidate for baptism, or the candidate themselves, desire masking, all participants within 10 feet of the baptism should be required to wear masks during the baptism).

Fellowship gatherings with food and drink are discouraged indoors. “Grab and go” distribution of food, or outdoor gatherings for fellowship, reduce transmission risk and should be strongly considered.

Congregations may choose to require or encourage rapid at-home testing, if available, for gatherings such as retreats or meetings in which individuals must interact for extended periods with others outside their immunological bubble. Testing should not be required for admission to worship or other open gatherings of the congregation.

It is advisable for meetings of the congregation for business or formation purposes (such as Vestry meetings, classes, committee meetings) to be held virtually, or with a virtual participation option.

It is essential to clearly communicate what precautions will be taken and what participants can expect for any worship service or other gathering.

GUIDANCE FOR HIGH OR EXTREMELY HIGH LOCAL RISK

Masking should be required for gatherings associated with worship or ministries of the congregation which involve members of the community not eligible for vaccination.

Face masks are advisable for all participating in worship and indoor gatherings of the congregation, and all gatherings of community or tenant groups inside church buildings.

Additional precautions advisable for in-person worship may include:

- Temporary reduction or suspension of singing, which projects breath and thus carries a higher transmission risk.
- Physical distancing in worship between households/immunological bubbles.
- Masking of the celebrant, or other leader, in liturgies which require the leader to be within six feet of others while speaking (marriages, baptisms, confirmation, etc.)

Congregations may decide to temporarily suspend in-person worship or other activities, at the judgement of their own leadership. Outside the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, congregations doing so should advise the bishop, and follow any direction the bishop may issue to ensure that access to the services of the church remains available in their community.

Fellowship gatherings with food and drink should not be held indoors. At these levels even unmasking outdoors for food and drink may be unwise. “Grab and go” distribution of food is wiser at times of high risk.

If an outreach or service ministry of the congregation *requires* the consumption of food or drink in church buildings, and “grab and go” meals are not an option, it is advisable for participants to be seated at least six feet apart from others not of their household or immunological bubble, and for masking and distancing to be maintained while the food is being served, with unmasking only at distanced tables while actively eating.

Congregations may choose to require or encourage rapid at-home testing, if available, for gatherings such as retreats or meetings in which individuals must interact for extended periods with others outside their immunological bubble. Testing should not be required for admission to worship or other open gatherings of the congregation.

As much as possible, meetings of the congregation for business or formation purposes (such as Vestry meetings, classes, committee meetings) should be held virtually, or with a virtual participation option.

It may be advisable for staff and volunteers to work remotely rather than from a shared office location.

It is essential to clearly communicate what precautions will be taken and what participants can expect for any worship service or other gathering.