

A Pastoral Letter from the Bishops
with renewed COVID-19 Guidelines

March 4, 2021

Those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength.
(Isaiah 40:31)

Ethics is essentially about how we negotiate our own and other people's vulnerabilities.
(Archbishop Rowan Williams)

Dear People of the Diocese of Massachusetts,

An Anniversary marking Weariness and Gratitude: As we arrive at the one-year anniversary of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we find ourselves waiting – with both deep fatigue and eager hope – for a return to the fuller life of community in church and world. Our grief at this long year of separation is real. Our relief at hopeful signs in the pandemic battle is palpable.

We are profoundly grateful for the faithfulness with which the people of our diocese have responded to the challenges of the past year. Through creative adaptations to worship, pastoral care, and service to the communities around us, our churches and people have refused to be “on hiatus.” Now our task is to continue caring for ourselves and one another with simultaneous attention to both factual health advisories and our Christian moral imperatives.

Hopeful Signs and Tempering Cautions: After a rocky start, the U.S. vaccine rollout has begun to gain traction. Thanks to vaccinations and to adherence to restrictions, infection rates, hospitalizations, and COVID-related deaths have been declining – though in some instances that progress has stalled. Governor Baker has [announced](#) that, effective incrementally on March 1 and March 22, previously closed business sectors will be allowed to reopen and capacity restrictions will be eased.

However, public health officials in recent days have cautioned strenuously that such reopenings are premature and risk stalling or reversing recent progress. We are advised that the baseline level of coronavirus cases needs to fall further before we resume normal activities, especially in light of the arrival of new fast-spreading variants of the virus. [Says the new CDC chief](#), “We may be done with the virus, but clearly the virus is not done with us. We cannot get comfortable or give in to a false sense of security that the worst of the pandemic is behind us, not when mass vaccination is so very close.”

Christian Moral Imperatives: In the face of the economic and social hardships of this pandemic, our decisions as Christians must align these health guidelines with Christian moral theology. We have been reminded in the past year of Saint Paul’s admonition that things which are “permissible” are not necessarily things that are “beneficial” to the common good. (I Corinthians 10:23) We bear responsibility towards the well-being of others, especially the most vulnerable among us. At a gathering of bishops last week, we were reminded by a Christian ethicist that “the earthly city is promoted not merely by relationships of rights and duties, but to an even greater extent by relationships” of unearned mercy and commitment to our common life. [i]

This Christian moral emphasis on communal obligation is reflected in a recent medical essay urging caution while the vaccination rollout continues. “Our social lives can resume, but only when the whole community is ready. The turning point does not arrive for individuals, one by one, as soon as they’ve been vaccinated; it comes for all of us at once, when a population become immune.” [ii]

Here and Now. All of this leads us, your bishops, to a posture of hopeful caution. We look to the impending Easter Season of Resurrection eager for new beginnings. We also believe that our actions must continue to manifest the utmost concern for one another as an act of love. *Accordingly, we strongly*

urge the continued suspension of in-person, indoor worship until at least April 19, affirming meanwhile all limitations of our prior guidelines. This April date, timed four weeks after the Commonwealth's March 22 milestone for re-openings, will allow us to observe any resumed surge resulting from public gatherings, and will provide additional time for vaccinations to begin establishing baseline levels of immunity. Any congregation which despite our counsel has chosen to continue limited in-person gatherings under the restrictions of the diocese and Commonwealth should **maintain the limitations described in our [Nov. 19 communique](#)** through April 19.

More detailed guidelines for regathering after April 19, and a summary of previously issued protocols, are below.

As we look towards Holy Week and Easter, we know that traversing these holy days once more with distancing restrictions is a deep disappointment. We believe, however, that such restraint is precisely reflective of Christ's Maundy Thursday mandate to love one another, and the Good Friday message of sacrifice. Incremental regathering in the long Easter season will be a true experience of renewed life and a rich blessing!

This comes with thanksgiving for each of you and your faithful ministries, and with hope and confidence that the church is being called in new ways to share in God's mission.

Faithfully,

The Rt. Rev. Alan M. Gates, Bishop Diocesan
The Rt. Rev. Gayle E. Harris, Bishop Suffragan

[i] Dr. Scott Bader-Saye, Professor of Christian Ethics and Moral Theology at Seminary of the Southwest, based upon Caritas in Veritate (Benedict XVI, 2009).

[ii] James Hamblin, M.D., lecturer at Yale School of Public Health, in "The False Dilemma of Post-Vaccination Risk," The Atlantic, 2/26/2021.

GUIDELINES for CHURCHES after APRIL 19, 2021

Follow public health best practices. We must continue to follow practices that will help sustain the progress that has been made so far. We strongly urge all persons to follow the counsel of public health leaders by wearing two masks, maintaining physical distancing, washing hands frequently, and avoiding unnecessary visits to public places. We especially urge caution for those who have yet to be vaccinated and those who are at higher risk for serious illness from COVID-19.

Observe capacity limits for in-person gatherings. Our expectation is that gatherings in our churches will **not exceed 75 persons maximum or 35% capacity/6-foot distancing between immediate households for indoor events, whichever is lower.** Outdoor events should **not exceed 150 persons maximum.** We recognize that these limits are somewhat more restrictive than the Commonwealth guidelines taking effect in March, reflecting our attention to health officials' response to those guidelines.

Continue virtual gatherings. Many churches have shown wonderful creativity by providing online Sunday worship and the Daily Office in a variety of formats, virtual coffee hours and Bible studies, and many other expressions of community. It is our expectation that virtual offerings will continue even when in-person gatherings resume so that as many as possible will be included in our life together.

Serve your neighbors. The economic toll of the pandemic continues to unfold. Congregations have given sacrificially to care for the hungry, unhoused, and unemployed, following best practices for safety. The need is still great. We trust every congregation will be seeking ways to help bear the burden of neighbors in need.

Continue to follow safety protocols. During the early stages of the pandemic, [*A Journey By Stages*](#) provided detailed guidance for various phases of regathering. Last summer we published [*Expanded Guidelines*](#) for Holy Communion, Holy Baptism, and pastoral visits. While these protocols are still in effect, we recognize that changing capacity limits and modifications to safety protocols over the past year have been confusing. At the end of this communication is a summary which combines the guidance from these two documents as they pertain to the current phase of regathering.

Be prepared to return to more restrictive practices. As we have seen with multiple surges in cases of COVID-19, the trajectory of the pandemic is not one of linear progress. Depending on resurgence or mutation of the virus, or the rise of a new threat to public health, a return to restrictive practices may be necessary.

Stay hopeful. We bear hope that widespread vaccination will happen in the coming weeks and that better treatments for the coronavirus will emerge. Life will not return to normal because we and our society have been changed by this pandemic. As we move forward into this next phase, we urge you to stay focused on what God is teaching us through this time. The church has much to learn and much to offer.

SUMMARY OF COVID-19 SAFETY PROTOCOLS

The following is a summary of protocols from [A Journey By Stages](#) and the [Expanded Guidelines](#). Please consult these documents for more detailed guidance and resources.

- **Practice safety.** Stay home if you are sick or feeling unwell. Consider participating in events virtually, especially if you have not yet been vaccinated or are at higher risk. Wear masks, even if you have been vaccinated, to protect yourself and those around you.
- **Capacity limits effective April 19, 2021:** 75 persons indoors, 150 persons outdoors OR 35% occupancy with 6-foot distance between households, *whichever is lower*. Capacity limits are to be observed for weddings and funerals as well.
- **Registration for services and events is strongly encouraged.**
- **Ventilate buildings:** Open windows or set HVAC systems to introduce fresh air wherever possible. Consider outdoor gatherings where indoor spaces cannot be well-ventilated.
- **Follow the latest [CDC guidance for faith-based facilities and cleaning and disinfecting instructions](#).**
- **Have a safety plan.** Implement a detailed plan for physical distancing, signage, and traffic patterns. Require and provide masks. Make hand sanitizer available. Limit the numbers of persons in bathrooms at any one time.
- **Remove all prayer books, Bibles, and hymnals.** Fonts and holy water stoups are to remain empty.
- **Congregational singing is not yet permitted.** A cantor or choristers may sing provided they wear masks and keep substantial distance from one another and the congregation. Twenty foot distance is the best practice.

- **The Peace is to be exchanged without physical touch.** Offer a reverent bow, wave, or greeting while maintaining physical distance.
- **Holy Communion is distributed as bread only.** Pay careful attention to preparation and hygiene practices as described in the [Expanded Guidelines](#).
- **No communal gatherings pre- or post-service are yet permitted,** e.g., coffee hours or other food services.
- **Formation events for children** are permitted only where parents or guardians tend their children, and households are kept at least 6 feet apart. Classes where children and teachers from multiple households are in close proximity to one another are not permitted. Nursery care is not permitted. Youth groups may meet according to the [Guidelines for Youth Groups](#).
- **Baptism may be administered** following protocols in the [Expanded Guidelines](#) (page 9). Special care should be exercised when a young child or a person who is at higher risk is to be baptized or is among the parents and sponsors.
- **Pastoral visits are to follow protocols as detailed in the [Expanded Guidelines](#).** Pastoral and eucharistic visits are to be kept brief. Observe the protocols of the hospital or care facility at all times.