

COVID Guidelines Update - November 17, 2020

Episcopal Diocese of Southern Virginia

NAVIGATING THE PANDEMIC: A PRAYER FOR WISDOM

At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give to you." And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. And now, O LORD my god, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people" (1 Kings 3:5-9)

These words, known as Solomon's Prayer for Wisdom, should surely resonate with us today. We face a baffling, frightening situation, not really knowing ourselves "how to go out or come in." The news we hear about rising cases of Covid-19 is not what we want – the number of cases increase at an alarming rate, with no end in sight. Give us an understanding mind, Lord, able to discern wisely between good and evil!

Solomon's prayer was answered. God provided wisdom, and Solomon ruled wisely and justly. God is faithful and merciful and stands ready to bestow upon us a similar wisdom if we ask for it. As we navigate through this pandemic, heading into the Advent and Christmas seasons, church rectors and vestries will need to make wise decisions about liturgical, pastoral and formational opportunities. Using the guidelines offered by the Diocese in June, churches have tools for making these decisions. Given the increasing cases, the Diocese offers the following additional guidance:

SHOULD WE CONTINUE TO GATHER FOR IN-PERSON WORSHIP? IF NOT, WHEN SHOULD WE STOP?

At the diocesan level, we continue to meet with a medical advisory panel to monitor the Covid-19 situation in Virginia. This panel, comprised of doctors, nurses, physicians' assistants, nurse practitioners, epidemiologists, and one attorney, has recently expressed alarm over the rate at which Covid-19 cases are rising. They recommend watching percent positivity rates. **As the**

percent positivity rate approaches 8%, medical personnel are nervous. At 10%, they are alarmed. Currently for the entire Commonwealth of Virginia, the percent positivity rate is 7.4%; however, we also have places in our diocese where the positivity rates are between 10 and 16%. (<https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/coronavirus/>) **This is not safe!**

Therefore, as individual parishes make decisions within their own context about whether to continue in-person worship, they are strongly advised to begin pulling back when the percent positivity rate in their area approaches 8%. In all likelihood as the percent positivity rate approaches 10% for the Commonwealth, Bishop Haynes will make a decision for the diocese to temporarily cease in-person gatherings. If your area is already at 10%, YOU SHOULD STOP IN-PERSON WORSHIP! We understand that we are heading into Christmas and Advent and that the possibility of virtual worship for such a sacred time might be heartbreaking. We pray to the Holy Spirit, that should that possibility become real, we would be empowered to experience the Nativity of Christ in new and mighty ways. WE are certain that God will be faithful!

WHAT ABOUT FELLOWSHIP AND FORMATION GATHERINGS?

The governor of Virginia has limited public gatherings to 25 people. Worship activities are exempt from this limitation. However, other gatherings at the church must adhere to the 25-person limit. This means, for example, that a wedding may gather in the church in a number greater than 25 (if that number can safely be accommodated with physical distancing); however, if that same group were to gather in a parish hall for a reception, that number would have to be limited to 25. Likewise, formational and fellowship gatherings would need to be limited to 25 people.

Congregations and clergy in our diocese should be proud of the way that they have responded to the Covid-19 Pandemic, staying connected with one another and offering opportunities, other than in-person, to worship. We encourage you to “stay the course!” As we move into Advent and contemplate the coming of Christ into our world, let us continue to remind ourselves that He is faithful, that He walks with us, and that He will not leave us to face this alone.