

December 15, 2021

Update from our Health Advisory Panel and Bishop Haynes

The coronavirus is not receding. In the first fourteen days of the month, the number of cases nationwide increased by 49%. In the Commonwealth of Virginia, the number of new cases surged by over 80%. Tragically, the number succumbing to the virus nation-wide surpassed 800,000 deaths. Spiking hospitalizations are constraining hospital services to non-COVID patients.

We are all accustomed to the need for additional precautions each winter as temperatures drop and cases of the flu and the common cold rise, but this is not an ordinary year. The presence of the coronavirus, the rise in hospitalizations attributable to the delta variant, and the speed at which the omicron variant is spreading reinforce the importance of being vigilant in safeguarding our own health and the health of others.

Our Health Advisory Panel met again on Monday of this week and in light of these developments urged caution, particularly when holding public gatherings, including worship. Accordingly, I am issuing my strongest statement this calendar year regarding safe worship practices. COVID protocols matter. While decision-making about congregation-specific protocols remains with parish clergy and vestries, **congregations must revisit their protocols and reinforce measures to mitigate the risk of transmission including mask wearing at worship and physical distancing.** Readiness for effective contact tracing also merits consideration. This is not the time to relax safe practices, even though all of us are more than ready for the pandemic to recede.

Congregations must assure that their designated Health Coordinator or Health Equity Team monitor developments and adjust protocols based on local health indicators, and in particular, the number of cases per 100,000 people in their city, county, or health district. That information is accessible [here](#). Currently the 7-day average number of cases per 100,000 has risen to 29.9 across the Commonwealth, but local numbers vary. Accurate data is essential to sound decision-making.

As I wrote to you just two weeks ago, “together, we are ‘weathering the storm’ of this pandemic, and together we put our trust in God who is guiding us to re-emerge.” Let’s persevere and take heart.

Psalm 91:1-4a:

You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress; my God in whom I trust.” For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions and under his wings you will find refuge.