

# *COME, HOLY GHOST, OUR SOULS INSPIRE*

## **A Word on the Loosening of Covid Restrictions**

In March of 2020 as the pandemic mounted its assault on our way of life, I faced the difficult challenge of placing restrictions on the ways in which we gathered – on the ways in which we continued “in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.” At that time, we collectively entered a pandemic desert where we had to learn new ways to worship, to pray, to teach and to be in community. I give thanks for the nimbleness, flexibility, and humility exhibited by the people of Southern Virginia as you accepted and adapted to these restrictions. It has not been easy.

Thanks be to God, cases have declined and are continuing to decline! In light of this good news and after consultation with the Health Advisory Panel, taking into account recent revised guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and our Governor, I have decided that the time has come to release churches in Southern Virginia from diocesan-wide pandemic restrictions. I am returning the monitoring and oversight of all protocols to individual parishes and faith communities. In issuing this release, I am expressing my trust and confidence in the vestries, health equity teams and clergy of all congregations to monitor civic guidelines, including those issued by the Governor, and to make decisions in accordance with their own contexts as to how to worship safely. ***It is my expectation and the expectation of the Health Advisory Panel that each parish and faith community will proceed safely in its particular context and, in its decision-making, will err on the side of caution.***

THE FOLLOWING GUIDANCE IS SUGGESTED:

### **REGATHERING PLANS:**

While congregations are no longer bound by the re-gathering plans submitted to the diocesan office, leadership may use those plans as a starting place in determining which restrictions can be safely lifted in their own contexts. While the diocesan office no longer needs to approve plans, we are happy to discuss them with you. Please direct any questions to Canon Roy Hoffman at [rhoffman@diosova.org](mailto:rhoffman@diosova.org).

### **PHYSICAL DISTANCING:**

There are no longer limits on the number of people who can gather, and physical distancing is no longer mandated for people who are fully vaccinated. However, leadership should be mindful of the desire of some folks to continue to physically distance and make provisions them to do so, particularly those who have yet to be vaccinated or who are unable to receive the vaccination.

### **MASKS:**

While masks have proven effective in mitigating the transmission of the virus (and other illness such as influenza and strep throat), the CDC has stated that fully vaccinated people may remove masks in both outdoor and indoor settings (unless in a congregate setting such as a health care facility, prison, school or other institutions where people reside). Governor Northam has lifted the state-wide mask restriction. Congregations are now free to make their own decisions regarding the use of masks, bearing in mind that while fully vaccinated people may safely remove masks, those who are not vaccinated should continue to wear masks. Education should be offered that those who decide to remove their masks should continue to physically distance so as to safeguard their own health and that of others.

### **CONGREGATIONAL/CHORAL SINGING:**

Both choral and congregational singing are now permitted, indoors and outdoors, with or without masks. Given the unique context of each parish including the size of its facility and the composition of its congregation, each is empowered to implement its own singing protocols, which may, in some cases, include continuing to sing only outdoors if that seems safest, with or without masks, and physically distant if deemed appropriate.

### **HOLY EUCHARIST:**

For now, it is strongly recommended that use of the common loaf and chalice be avoided, offering communion in one kind only (with wafers) or in both kinds with the pre-packaged sealed bread and wine cups that many congregations have been using.

### **COFFEE HOUR:**

Each congregation may determine for itself how to safely conduct coffee hour. Erring on the side of caution, consideration should be given to avoiding the serving of any food that requires the sharing of serving utensils. Consequently, if coffee is served from a common carafe, or if food is served from a common serving dish, a designated person should be assigned as server to mitigate the risk of contamination of serving utensils. If parishioners serve themselves from a common serving dish, deli papers or gloves should be provided instead of a shared utensil. We continue to recommend the offering of pre-packaged snacks.

### **FORMATION:**

Christian formation can resume, although congregations should be mindful of preventive measures such as handwashing, limiting the sharing of materials, etc. Volunteers who offer to lead formational experiences are encouraged to be vaccinated. Nurseries may re-open. Parents are trusted to make their own decisions as to whether they feel comfortable returning their child to the church nursery. Nursery volunteers should be fully vaccinated.

### **SCHOOLS:**

School administrators and boards may resume their own monitoring of appropriate protocols and make decisions appropriate in their own particular contexts, subject to guidelines issued by the Governor and local authorities monitoring schools of the same type in their particular locality.

### **OUTSIDE GROUPS:**

Church leaders may entrust outside groups to monitor their own protocols when using church facilities.

In the coming days and weeks, my prayers are with you all as we continue to navigate this uncharted territory. Thank you for working with us over the past several months. It is an extraordinary privilege and honor to serve as your bishop.

Blessings and peace in Christ,  
Bishop Susan