

The Diocese of Nebraska

The Right Reverend J. Scott Barker, Bishop
109 North 18th St. Omaha NE 68102



September 24, 2020

Beloved in Christ –

This is to offer some updated guidance as we continue to work together to find ways to faithfully and safely gather for public worship during the on-going COVID-19 pandemic. We are in a different place – and have learned some new things – since last I wrote to you in late July. I’m grateful for the creative ways you have found to gather the people of God throughout the pandemic thus far. **What follows is an amendment to the previous directions we’ve published regarding the public health threshold that must be met in order to return to indoor public worship on Sunday mornings.**

At the time I am writing this letter, COVID-19 is once again on an uptick in Nebraska. The seven-day moving average of new cases per 100,000 people is at its highest point since May, and climbing. Many of the current outbreaks are now localized in small towns and in greater Nebraska. Last week, we saw the single highest number of COVID related deaths in the state since the pandemic began. If we’ve learned anything in the last six months, it’s that trying to predict what COVID-19 will do next is all but impossible. That said, this is a moment when, statewide at least, the risk of spread, infection, sickness and death is as high or higher as it has ever been.

Against that sobering backdrop, we’ve also acquired substantial new knowledge over the last couple of months about how to mitigate against the transmission of this disease, a fact that has allowed many Nebraska parishes to resume regular in-person worship. I am very grateful for the seriousness with which all of you have engaged the discernment about whether to resume public worship, as well as the systems you’ve put in place to protect the people of God where you have made the decision to do so.

For some time, we’ve known that our current metric for signaling the potentially safe re-opening of public worship (a two week decline in local new COVID-19 cases) would not work for us over the long haul. After having conversations with many of you, as well as various Nebraska public health officials, I am implementing a new policy to help guide all of you in making local decisions about when it’s safe to gather for worship.

At this [link](#), you will find a detailed and up-to-date visual that tracks new COVID-19 cases per 100,000 in every Nebraska county. The platform is called “Healthy Nebraska.” To track your local info, go to the check-list on the right hand side of the page and click all the county boxes that represent places where your parishioners live. The software will then combine together

current health data from all those counties, and show you a graph of new cases. It's important to focus on the **black bar** for the best picture of where things stand at the moment in your area. That's the seven-day moving average of new infections, which helps smooth over errors in data reporting and small sample sizes.

As of Sunday, October 4th, you and your parish leadership are permitted to hold public Sunday worship indoors if (and only if) the seven-day moving average for your community, as reported by "Healthy Nebraska," stands at less than 20 new cases per 100,000 people. Where that is the case, it is reasonable to assume that carefully managed indoor public worship is safe.

This new metric for gaging when it's safe to worship indoors will have some distinct advantages. First, this is accurate and hard scientific data. Folks may not like it, but they can't reasonably argue with it. Second, you can easily track and combine data from several counties and thus account for all the people in your congregation who might attend worship on a given Sunday. Finally, you can share this link with your congregation so that everyone can track the data in real-time and understand why it's been deemed safe (or unsafe) to gather for worship in a given week. This will be especially important in the likely event that services will have to be suspended at some point after they resume.

Your continued vigilance enforcing the now well-established norms for safe human interaction during the pandemic remains the real key to safely gathering for worship. It is my expectation that you and your vestry have considered all of this information and have a written plan in place before returning to Sunday public in-person worship.

* **Communication** continues to be one of our best defenses against the spread of COVID-19. Please make sure the safety plan you and your leadership agree to is widely circulated, with key prevention measures posted at every building entrance. Clear, consistent, public communication about safety protocols will help ensure compliance with your plan and is an important aspect of mitigating your parish's liability.

* Gathering in an area with **good air circulation** is key. Outside is best by far. Inside with windows wide open, or an HVAC system that moves and filters air, is second best. Careful consideration should be given to whether any worship gathering should occur in an indoor space that does not have good air circulation.

* We now know that **masks should be worn** at all times by everyone participating in worship, with the possible exception of single individuals removing their masks when leading worship, and only then if they can do so at a safe remove from the rest of the congregation.

* **Social distancing** between individuals and / or family units should be maintained at all times. Six feet of space between household groups is the minimum, and the risk of spread is decreased if people can gather at an even greater distance from one another. It is very important to manage traffic in such a way that people are socially distant not just during worship but as they come and go from the gathering.

* **Frequent hand sanitizing** is critical. Building reminders into worship to do so, and providing the means, is an important part of safely gathering for worship.

* **Singing** (or shouting during a sermon if that's your thing) are activities associated with disease spread. Soloists who perform outside and /or at a remove of 20 feet or more from a congregation are a reasonable exception to the "no-singing" rule. The safer move is to focus on instrumental music.

* Celebrating **Holy Communion presents its own set of special challenges**. Most of our communities where worship has resumed are forgoing that practice for now. For those who feel strongly inclined, I ask that the protocols I distributed on May 26 continue to be your guide. You have my permission to adapt, within reason, those protocols for local use.

Without a doubt, this has been the most challenging crisis faced by the Episcopal Church in many decades, and it is a blessing for which I give thanks to God that all of you have chosen to serve in this place and at this extraordinary moment. To a person, you have been faithful, prayerful, creative and courageous disciples. I know that at times the cost of doing ministry in this moment has been both personally and professionally high. Be assured that you are prayed for every day, and that your diocesan staff is here to support you in any way that we can in the months and years to come.

Faithfully Yours in Christ –

