

Report and Recommendations from the Task Force for Re-entering, Re-opening, and Re-imagining for the Diocese of New Jersey

May 28, 2021

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

--John 13:34-35

As vaccination rates and availability rise, and public health guidance and federal, state, and local mandates are reduced, we as the gathered Body of Christ are able to eliminate many of the limits on gathering that we have diligently followed for many months.

What does not change, and cannot change, is our primary commitment to love one another as Jesus has loved us. That commitment must grow even more active on the part of congregations and individuals, and must adapt to the unique situation of each congregation, as guidance from diocesan and state leadership changes in response to the evolving science and facts around us.

This new report from the Reentering, Reopening, and Reimagining (RRR) Task Force is meant to help congregations, their leaders and members, care for one another and consider how we gather joyfully and appropriately in this transitional time of a global pandemic.

This report replaces, in its entirety, the report dated June 4, 2020,
and most recently updated May 14, 2021

Required Precautions for Gathering

- Any individual who is not fully vaccinated (two weeks or more after the final recommended dose in their vaccine series) must wear a mask at any gathering of the congregation or on church property, whether indoors or outside.
- Those who are fully vaccinated are not required to wear masks, indoors or out.
 - **Any individual may choose to wear a mask at any time, and should not be questioned about their reasons for doing so.** Many may choose to continue to mask at church gatherings out of care for others who are not vaccinated.
 - Congregations should make the applicable requirements for masking clear for all visitors, worshippers, members and guests.
 - The congregation is not required to verify the vaccination status of anyone entering the church property or worshipping with the congregation, except for limited ministries described below.
- The congregation **must verify and record** the fully-vaccinated status of choir members (whose ministry requires them to project their breath further and more forcefully than most worshippers), lectors or readers, and any liturgical leaders whose ministry requires speaking to the congregation.
 - If the fully-vaccinated status of a choir member or liturgical leader cannot be verified, that individual must remain masked and at least six feet distant from anyone not in their household or immunological bubble, 10 feet while speaking and 15 feet singing.
- Communion shall continue to be offered in one kind only. The common cup is not yet authorized in this diocese.
- The congregation must make clear what parameters will apply to worship and gatherings so that individuals may make an informed choice about whether it is safe and appropriate for them to attend or participate in person.
- Worship materials, such as Prayer Books and Hymnals, may be returned to the pews and used as needed.

- Masking and distancing is still required for any children’s activities.
 - In Sunday school classes and activities for children under 16 (until July 10, and for children under 12 until two months after an approved vaccine for that age group is authorized), all children and adults must be masked. Adults are to maintain a six-foot or greater distance from children not in their household, and children are to maintain a three-foot or greater distance from one another.
 - Congregations and their tenants must continue to follow state and local guidance governing summer camps, schools, and pre-schools.

- If your congregation is contacted by someone who has been in your building(s) or on church grounds within the past 14 days and has been medically diagnosed with COVID-19, has been notified of a positive test for COVID-19, or for whom such is reasonably being considered by a competent medical professional, the congregation must notify any affected worshippers and visitors, **but under no circumstances should reveal the name of the person.**

The congregation must also report the exposure to Canon Phyllis Jones (pjones@dioceseofnj.org), including specifics about when the person was at the church, for how long, and if it is suspected others may have been exposed, and cooperate with public health authorities in contact tracing as needed.

- During fellowship activities, such as coffee hour, those who are not fully vaccinated should continue to maintain physical distance from those outside their immunological bubble, especially when their mask is removed to eat or drink.

Those who are fully vaccinated do not need to wear masks or maintain distance during fellowship activities.

Recommendations to honor and care for the whole Body of Christ

The Task Force strongly recommends that congregations consider that this remains a time of uncertainty and that individual needs, comfort level, concerns and health vary considerably. In order not to divide the Body of Christ, congregations should assess the needs, concerns, and circumstances of their own community and make every effort to provide equitable access to worship and the sacraments of the church for all.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. [...] The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’, nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ [...] God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

1 Corinthians 12:12, 21, 24b-27

- Regular washing or sanitizing of hands is encouraged for all, especially those who prepare the altar for worship, and those who lead worship and offer the sacraments for the church.
- When planning worship and gatherings, congregations should be aware of who may not yet be eligible for vaccination, and should consider the following:
 - At time of publication (May 28, 2021), no one under the age of 16 has yet had time to be fully vaccinated, and no one under the age of 12 is yet eligible for vaccination. Evidence makes clear children are susceptible to COVID19.
 - Many congregations will have individual members who are not able to be vaccinated or for whom available vaccines will not be fully effective.
- Some congregations may find that it is appropriate to support the health of their community by continuing to maintain requirements for everyone to be masked, regardless of vaccination.
- All congregations are encouraged to seek ways to make the worship of the church accessible and welcoming to those who are not vaccinated, or who need or desire to exercise greater precautions
 - If your worship space allows, you may wish to set aside an area in which six-foot distancing and masking will be maintained. If doing so, ensure that these are not the least-desirable seats in the worship space.
 - As singing still poses a higher risk of transmission than most other worship activities, congregations should consider regularly offering at least one service without singing.
 - Congregations may also choose to designate that all must be masked – or that additional transmission precautions will be taken – at some but not all of their worship services.
 - It is wise to explicitly discuss the precautions taken, and the conditions expected, with those being baptized, confirmed, or married at the church, and with the families of those individuals and families preparing for funerals, as appropriate. Congregations are encouraged to adopt extra precautions if necessary, to allow individuals to receive these sacraments and services of the Church without the burden of worry about COVID-19 or other infectious transmission.
- It is essential to clearly communicate what precautions will be taken and what participants can expect for any worship service or other gathering.
- **Congregations are strongly encouraged to continue to provide remote worship options (including streamed or online services).**

- Although gathering contact information from all who attend worship or gatherings is no longer required, congregations may still find it to be a good idea to gather this information to assist with contact tracing or for other congregational support.
- Congregations offering feeding or shelter ministries may wish to retain masking and/or distancing requirements until a larger proportion of the general population is fully vaccinated and should always follow local and state guidelines and requirements.
- ***Encourage all who can be vaccinated to get vaccinated to care for the whole Body of Christ and for the whole human community.***