



The Episcopal Diocese of East Carolina

The Right Reverend Robert Stuart Skirving, Bishop

September 29, 2021

To the people of the Episcopal Diocese of East Carolina:

Greetings to you, and peace in the name of our risen Lord Jesus!

More than eighteen months have passed since the onset of COVID-19 and the suspension of public worship in the Diocese of East Carolina. Sixteen months have passed since we first published guidelines for a return to public worship in our diocese, guidelines which since then have been regularly reviewed and revised as appropriate. We have worked together to establish safe and creative ways to gather for worship, whether online, outdoors or in our buildings. We have learned new ways to be together as the body of Christ and to respond to God's call to serve our neighbors. We have been reminded of inequities that are built into our societal structures, inequities which prevent some from having the same access as others to things like health care, education, and employment. These last eighteen months have been deeply challenging for all of us.

During the recent online gathering of the House of Bishops of The Episcopal Church, our preachers offered imagery that pointed to their understanding that we stand on a threshold. We have left behind that which we have known in the past but have not yet fully entered into that which waits for us in the future. Many of us find such threshold moments to be unnerving and awkward, perhaps because we crave certainty. Threshold moments can be stressful and in response many of us behave as if we believe that we hold the "right" position on most every important issue, while judging others to be wrong when they differ from us.

Perhaps at threshold moments like the one we continue to face, it is important to remember words which the apostle Paul offered in a different context, "we walk by faith, and not by sight." (2 Corinthians 5:7 NRSV) When we "walk by faith" we acknowledge that we cannot know all the details and yet we must still make choices about the path forward and commitments about how we will give of our time and energy. When asked by a teacher of the law which commandment was the greatest, Jesus responded by affirming that we are to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbor as ourselves. (from Mark 12:29-31) Perhaps at threshold moments like the one we continue to face, we ought to focus all of our efforts on loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Hopefully, you will hear that spirit expressed in our newest guidelines for public worship. These guidelines resemble those published on May 26th of this year, but for the first time since March 2020 now allow for the option to share wine during celebrations of Holy

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Eucharist, when congregational leadership determines they are ready to do so. Please see the attached guidelines for details. We will continue to trust our clergy and churchwardens to make good decisions for our congregations, while staying within the parameters of these guidelines. In all things, let us look to the common good of those whom God will lead to worship with us, demonstrating generous hospitality to all, regardless of their vaccination status.

As we continue to “walk by faith, and not by sight” I strongly encourage you to get vaccinated if you have not already done so and if your doctor recommends it for you. In the communities where we live and serve, let us be known as people of faith who look not to our own interests first, but to the needs of our neighbors, seeing in each neighbor the face of God.

May God’s Holy Spirit equip us with everything we need for the journey that lies open before us!

Yours in Christ,



Robert Stuart Skirving
Bishop, Diocese of East Carolina

Post Office Box 1336 Kinston, North Carolina 28503

Telephone 252-522-0885 Facsimile 252-523-5272 www.diocese-eastcarolina.org

Guidelines for Public Worship in the Diocese of East Carolina

Effective September 29, 2021

1) All restrictions on building capacity and on physical distancing have been removed.

-That said, some congregation may choose to reserve a section of their space for those who would prefer to keep physical spacing from others. Others may choose to offer physical spacing at one service but not another. Some may continue to offer outdoor worship. All provided options should be well advertised. None should require that people be asked to prove their vaccination status.

2) Regarding the need for face masking, individuals and congregations should adopt the following framework in planning for public worship:

***-All may wear a face mask** - Each of us will have a different comfort level about being with others in public. Those gathering for public worship should feel welcome to wear a face mask if they prefer to do so. Some may choose to wear a face mask when they cannot maintain physical distance from others.*

***-Some should wear a face mask** - Those who have not yet been vaccinated should wear a face mask when they are in close quarters with others. This would apply to children who are too young to be vaccinated, those who cannot be vaccinated, and those who have not chosen to be vaccinated.*

***-None must wear a face mask** - But we can certainly hope that all who should wear a face mask will do so, out of an abundance of care and concern for the most vulnerable in our communities!*

3) More Restrictive Options Regarding Physical Distancing and Face Masks

-Congregations may establish and implement a more restrictive plan with regards to building capacities, physical distancing and face masks, but must do their best to accommodate all people, those vaccinated and those not.

4) Celebration of Holy Eucharist

-Congregations may now offer both bread and wine during communion. Clergy, consulting with their churchwardens, will make the decision about whether or not they are ready to offer wine, based on their own situation and context, and based on their ability to implement safe patterns.

-As a sign of hospitality, Clergy and Lay Eucharistic Ministers should consider choosing to be masked while setting the table, while celebrating the Eucharist and while distributing the Eucharistic elements. Efforts should always be made to minimize the number of people having contact with Eucharistic vessels or

elements. The use of hand sanitizer should still be expected for those involved in celebrations of the Eucharist.

-For now, it would still be preferable for congregations to use wafers for communion, rather than a loaf of bread that would require much more handling.

-Wine may now be shared as a part of our Eucharistic celebrations, according to the following pattern:

- When preparing for the Eucharist, a single chalice with a small amount of wine and water should be placed on the altar along with a single cruet/flagon of an appropriate size, filled with enough wine/water for the whole congregation.*
- When the time comes for distribution of the elements, wine should be offered from standing stations and not at the altar rail. If more than one standing station will be needed, wine from the cruet/flagon that was on the altar during the prayer of consecration should be poured out into other cruets/flagons at the time of distribution.*
- Each individual or household intending to receive wine, might be invited to bring their own cup forward at the time of communion. Alternatively, the congregation might provide small cups for use by individuals or households, having those ready on a side table and not placed on the altar. When possible, the use of disposable cups should be avoided.*
- After first receiving bread, those wishing to receive wine will approach one of the Eucharistic Ministers, who will pour a small amount of wine into each cup, providing only enough for that individual or household. Those receiving wine will then step to the side to fully consume all the wine in their cup.*
- At appropriate locations, there should be places for empty cups to be left before those receiving return to their seats. Following worship, reusable cups should be either a) returned to those who brought them, to be taken home and properly washed, or b) washed properly by the congregation to be used again for future gatherings. For single use cups, proper care should be used in disposal. Members of the Altar Guild might oversee this process.*
- Only the celebrant should drink from the chalice. For now, sharing of the common cup is not to take place, whether by sipping or intinction.*
- Questions about this pattern, or variations to it, should be directed to the clergy and churchwardens of the congregation, who may contact Canon Mollie Roberts for clarification.*

5) Singing in Worship

-Singing is allowed as a part of worship, both by choirs and congregations. Musicians should be given the same choices as others present, with regards to physical distancing and face masking.

6) Other Worship Practices

-With respect to the exchange of the Peace, the collection of an offering, and any other worship practices that have been modified during these past months, congregational leaders should reintroduce these practices gently and at an appropriate pace, teaching those gathered for worship to be respectful of the needs of those others who are around them.

7) Holy Baptism

-In celebrating Holy Baptism, Clergy may choose to continue with preventative measures such as those recommended in May 2020, or they may negotiate greatly reduced precautions with those who will be involved.

8) Ministries with Children

-All involved in ministries with children, and particularly with children who are too young to be vaccinated, should be vaccinated, and should continue to practice physical distancing, masking and other recommended protocols. Patterns such as you have been following should be continued for the time being.

9) Coffee and Receptions

-Congregations may return to hosting coffee and receptions after worship and at other times. Safe practices should always be followed, including the provision of individual servings where possible rather than the sharing of a potluck meal.

**Guidelines are effective as of September 29, 2021
and will remain in effect until such time as they are replaced or remove**