



BISHOP OF THE
EPISCOPAL DIOCESE *of the* RIO GRANDE

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Diocese of the Rio Grande
New Mexico and Far West Texas

A Pastoral Letter

My dear friends in Christ,

Given the good news about increasing vaccination rates and decreasing viral spread in New Mexico and Far West Texas, as of Sunday, June 13th, we invite congregations to consider taking steps toward public gatherings.

How do I love my neighbor in this moment when some of us are eager to take off our masks, others feel uncomfortable doing so, and some never put them on to begin with?

Our churches always try to be aware of and responsive to the needs of those around us - especially the most vulnerable among us.

In this moment, we are balancing the needs of those who are not vaccinated, the needs of those who are fully vaccinated, and the needs of those still at risk from Covid-19 - including all children under 12.

Remember:

Love your neighbor means being compassionate to people who feel differently than we do about masks, vaccinations, and the acceptable level of health risk from Covid-19.

Love your neighbor means respecting the decisions others are making regarding their health and the risks they are willing to take.

Love your neighbor means hospitality- welcoming all people to church - those who choose to and those who, for whatever reason, choose not to be vaccinated.

Also Remember:

Those not vaccinated are still at risk of Covid infection and are NOT recommended to gather with people, eat in restaurants, or take off their masks inside with others, among other things.

Children under 12 are not yet vaccinated - parents and grandparents may not be comfortable going maskless.

People may have weak immune systems for many reasons - organ transplants, cancer treatment, etc.

We must not assume everyone is vaccinated, or wants to be.



With all that in mind, as of June 13th, congregations may:

- Resume Congregational Singing while maintaining masking and social distancing. This includes Choral singing.
- Resume Coffee Hour and Hospitality *Outdoors*.
 - No buffets
 - A volunteer to serve as a “barista” to pour coffee into a clean, fresh cup every time. Have that same barista add cream and sugar to the new clean cup upon request.
 - Ensure that your “barista” is masked and gloved.
 - Maintain distancing as much as is possible for those who are removing their masks while drinking.
 - If you are going to serve food, only do so in individually wrapped packages. In the case of congregational picnics or lunches, encourage congregants to bring their own food from home.

As a general rule:

Make the distinction between Open and Closed meetings.

- Liturgies are open to the public, and so masks and social distancing are still expected. We must protect those most vulnerable among us and be hospitable to visitors and newcomers that may join us.
- Closed meetings (Bible studies, vestry meetings, etc.) can be maskless - if everyone is vaccinated *and* everyone agrees to remove their masks.

We all have an opportunity to practice the love of our neighbor with kindness and grace, paying special attention to care for those most vulnerable among us. We have done a great job of keeping our churches safe thus far. As we take these next steps together, may the love of God be in our hearts and in our actions!

Faithfully,

The Right Rev'd Michael B. Hunn
Bishop, Diocese of the Rio Grande