

August 26, 2021

Below is a letter from +Bishop Matthew Gunter, Bishop Provisional of the Diocese of Eau Claire. He has asked the clergy of Eau Claire to distribute it to all parishioners.

Dear Faithful People of the Diocese of Eau Claire,

It looked for a while like we were approaching the light at the end of the covid tunnel. Now, with the presence of the Delta variant and rising infection rates, it appears the tunnel has gotten longer. This is very discouraging as all of us are tired and frustrated with the ways this pandemic has complicated our lives and how we function as the church. But I am confident that that the Holy Spirit will continue to give us what we need – each member and as a community – to faithfully engage this challenge.

From the beginning of this pandemic, the Diocese of Eau Claire has allowed each congregation to discern what it deemed to be a faithful and responsible response with the guidance of the Diocesan Covid Task Force. I have been committed to maintaining that policy. So, for the time being, decisions regarding all gathering for worship, formation, governance, and non-church groups using church space remain the responsibility of clergy and vestries. I do want to urge the following:

Get vaccinated if you have not already. I believe the human ingenuity that has led to the development and production of the vaccines, as with modern medicine generally, are a gift from God. Vaccination radically reduces the chances of contracting the virus (and therefore spreading it) and the severity of symptoms. Even so, the Delta variant has considerably higher rates of transmission and contagion than previous strains, requiring far less exposure time. Though being vaccinated is the surest protection and the best means by which to contain the pandemic, vaccinated persons *can* still be infected and can, therefore, infect others. So, I commend the most recent recommendations from our Task Force to you.

- Follow the CDC guidance to return to masking in indoor settings regardless of vaccination status in regions where the viral transmission risk is rated “Significant” or “High.” Risk level on the four-point CDC scale can be determined by going to <https://covid.cdc.gov/coviddata-tracker/> #county-view and selecting the state and county from the dropdown menus.
  - Wear masks during our indoor services to protect those who are unable to be vaccinated (such as children under 12) and those at greater risk of severe illness. We wear masks for our families, for our loved ones, for our friends, for our congregation, for our community, as well as for ourselves.
  - Practice social distancing except those from the same household. Clergy should wear masks when they will be within 10 feet of congregants, such as
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when they are distributing communion and when they greet parishioners before or after the service.

- Coffee hour should either be suspended when the county's risk level is Substantial or High, or modified (such as having coffee outdoors).

I know this all feels like a step backwards. But, given the infection rates and the potential strain on our health system, I think the above are wise.

Finally, I call on you to pray.

First, give thanks. Thank God for his promise to be with us in all things and that his hold on us is stronger than all else. Pray that we each may know that in our bones and that the Holy Spirit will strengthen us. Give thanks for the wonders of modern medicine. Give thanks for the dedicated and informed guidance provided by our own Task Force.

Pray for an end to this pandemic. Pray for doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals. Pray that all of us might have courage, wisdom, patience, and charity to make our way through this together.

Finally, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13).

Under the Mercy.

The Rt. Rev. Matthew Gunter

Bishop Provisional of the Diocese of Eau Claire

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