



Lower Susquehanna Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

The Rev. James S. Dunlop
Bishop

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Oscar Arnulfo Romero, Bishop of El Salvador, martyr, died 1980

Dear Siblings in Christ,

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. - John 15:12

As more and more people are vaccinated, and the number of new COVID cases has declined over the last couple of months, many are wondering about updated guidelines for worship and in-person gatherings. Having just crossed the one-year mark of closing in-person worship for the first time, I offer these recommendations for your prayerful consideration. As shared in the past, I want to reiterate that our highest Christian values are love of neighbor and minimization of COVID infection risk.

First and foremost, since last December, the infection trends have been downward. We continue to encourage COVID task forces to look at county infection rates of new infections per 100,000 population and percent of positive testing in each community. As an example, on December 14, 2020, York County reported 113 cases per 100,000. By March 8, 2021, York declined below the threshold of 20 to 18.7. With a goal of 5.0% or below, York's positive test rate declined from 18.8% to 5.9% in March of 2021.

As people become more confident and vaccination more accessible, behaviors are changing. In the past week, York has increased to 27 cases per 100,000 with a 9.7% positive test rate. These numbers are concerning. Though some counties in our synod were under the goals of 20 new cases per 100,000, and 5.0% positive test rates, **no county in our synod is below these guidelines today.**

At the same time, the Governor announced increased gathering limits effective Easter Sunday (<https://www.governor.pa.gov/newsroom/gov-wolf-effective-april-4-more-options-for-restaurants-and-other-businesses-mass-gathering-maximums-increase/>). These new guidelines raise maximum occupancy limits for indoor events to 25%, and to 50% of maximum capacity for outdoor events. In both cases, the expanded maximum occupancy is permitted **only if** attendees comply with the 6-foot physical distancing requirement and public health safety protocols.

I want to be clear that this pandemic, no matter how tired we are of it, is not over. Every congregation should make its own decision when to safely gather in person. I continue to believe that gathering indoors is a risk. Congregation COVID task forces must continue to pay careful attention to community statistics, venue size, maximum capacity limitations, public health safety guidelines, including facilities' air filtration and circulation, and social distancing protocols.

If COVID infections continue to increase, congregations should continue to monitor and modify gatherings, as appropriate. Because of air circulation, as the weather warms, outside gatherings remain safer. Under no circumstances should there be any gathering without masks. In addition, group singing remains extremely dangerous, masked or not.

In the eleventh chapter of Matthew's gospel (verse 28), we hear Jesus' invitation for all of us who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, to come to him and receive rest. Here, Jesus encourages us to trade our yoke for his; the yoke of love that reconciles, restores, and furthers God's Kingdom here on earth, rather than causes harm.

This pandemic is not over. May we not put others at risk because we are tired. May we take Christ's yoke upon us, loving others, monitoring the risk in our communities, faithfully recognizing the limitations of our worship spaces, and responding with Christ-like decisions about in-person gatherings. We are closer to moving beyond this pandemic. Maintaining the behaviors that contributed to this point will help us move forward safely together. Do not lose heart; the resurrection is nearing. May God's sustaining Spirit bless you today and always.

With deep gratitude and sure and certain hope of the resurrection,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "James S. Dunlop". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

† James S. Dunlop, bishop
Lower Susquehanna Synod ELCA