



LOWER SUSQUEHANNA SYNOD

WHERE THE HUNGRY ARE FED AS WE HAVE BEEN FED BY CHRIST.

The Rev. James S. Dunlop
Bishop

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George Herbert, hymnwriter, died 1633

Dear Siblings in Christ:

As we begin the season of Lent, I give thanks to God for the rapidly declining number of new daily COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths and for the ways in which we have been church together. In many ways, the past few years have felt like an extended season in the desert journey. We have voluntarily, and even involuntarily at times, done without many things that are important to us. I would like to personally thank you for undertaking the variety of fasting sacrifices that support the health and wellbeing of our communities.

On Friday, February 25, 2022, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) updated the strategy to help communities respond to the current realities of the coronavirus. Instead of relying on the number of community cases to determine restrictions, the new CDC guidelines direct counties to assess the risk of the virus based on three criteria: new weekly COVID-related hospital admissions, percentage of COVID-occupied hospital beds, and new cases per 100,000 over the previous week. These three factors determine a county's risk as low, medium, or high. Under these new guidelines, only areas of high risk require everyone to wear a mask. To determine your community's risk level, the CDC is providing a COVID-19 Community Level tool with corresponding prevention measures: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/covid-by-county.html>.

The good news is that, as of today, all counties in our synod are at medium to low risk. This means that we can gather indoors relatively safely, as more than 70% of the population is vaccinated. However, people are still dying and getting sick. Young children still are unable to be vaccinated, and immunocompromised members of our community remain vulnerable. Based on these new guidelines, I offer the following recommendations:

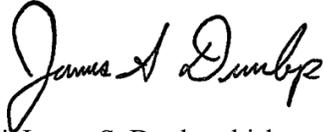
- Congregations maintain an active COVID-19 Task Force to monitor the CDC's community level risk tools and implement the CDC-recommended prevention measures appropriate for your county's risk level.
- To support congregation leaders in worship protocol decision making, Dr. Tim Babinchak, infectious disease specialist, recently joined Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod leaders to offer insights on assessing current gathering and worship practices (watch video here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5GL_idm74X4). Leaders may find this resource helpful as you consider changing protocols.
- Before relaxing protocols, I encourage you to assess your congregation's feelings about protections.
- According to the CDC's latest guidelines, there are some situations where people should always wear a mask. People with symptoms, a positive test, or exposure to someone with COVID-19, should wear a mask. Keep in mind that some people may choose to wear a mask at any time

based on personal preference. People who wear high quality masks are well protected, even if others around are not masking.

- Singing continues to pose a high risk of transmission. Consider limiting singing or encourage people to mask when they sing.
- Recognizing there are immunocompromised and unvaccinated people in our faith communities, as well as those who are not ready to return to in-person worship, I highly encourage you to continue offering online opportunities for worship and fellowship.
- As we have learned all too well, the situation can change in a moment's notice. Please be prepared to adapt quickly if there is a community outbreak or new variant.

Tomorrow, with the whole church, we enter a solemn season remembering Jesus' Passover from death to life. We are reminded that we, too, experience wilderness seasons. It is my prayer that this Lent, as communities of faith together, God renews our spirits, Christ restores our faith, and the Holy Spirit refreshes our weary souls. After all, God is always with us in the desert and the resurrection is yet to come.

Yours in Christ,

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

† James S. Dunlop, bishop
Lower Susquehanna Synod, ELCA