



# 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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December 14, 2021

*He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. – Isaiah 40:11 (NRSV)*

Advent blessings in the name of Jesus Christ - the one who is, and the one who is to come again.

I write first to express my gratitude for how all of you are working selflessly for the sake of the common good and to share my concern as COVID-19 continues to deeply impact our local communities and the world. The growing weariness from the many challenges, complications, and complexities of this virus are of prayerful concern. These have proven to be trying times for all of us. I pray daily for your spiritual, emotional, and physical health and want to remind you that our staff is here to support you. May you continue to be granted Christ's strength and used as instruments of healing to those in need. I pray also for the many families who have lost loved ones from COVID-19, and for the increasing number of our leaders contracting COVID-19. Please join me in continuing to pray for the end to this pandemic.

One of the current challenges is the ongoing surge of cases and deaths. COVID-19 case counts across our synod are very distressing. Six of our counties are at very high risk and three counties are at the highest-level, severe risk. Positive test rates greater than 5% indicate community spread and insufficient testing. Our counties range between 9.6% to a high of 26% positive test rate in Lebanon County. York and Lancaster Counties are reporting the worst test rates since the beginning of the pandemic. Statistically, we are experiencing greater risk than we were a year ago. Cases per 100,000 people and positive test rates for each of the counties in our synod as of December 13, 2021, are reported as follows:

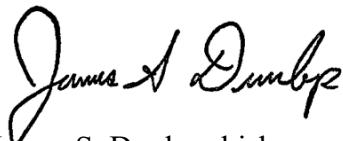
County	New Cases per 100,000 people	Positive Test Rate
Fulton	127.8	9.6%
Franklin	74.3	22.8%
Adams	64.5	18.2%
York	79.0	21.7%
Lancaster	62.3	19.1%
Lebanon	83.8	26.0%
Dauphin	58.2	16.1%
Perry	65.8	25.1%
Cumberland	55.8	15.2%

Research indicates that vaccinations effectively protect against COVID-19. At the same time, they are not a guarantee. As we have learned, the Delta variant is more easily transmitted; breakthrough cases among the vaccinated continue to rise. Vaccinated people still become infected and when they do, they are less likely to experience severe illness or hospitalization yet appear to spread the virus through community transmission.

As you continue to make difficult decisions for the health and wellbeing of our communities, please prayerfully consider these guidelines. Gather your COVID-19 task force regularly to evaluate best practices. After vaccinations, masking and social distancing remain the next best tools in slowing the spread of the coronavirus. Encourage everyone, regardless of vaccination status, to mask while indoors and socially distance. Outdoor gatherings are considerably safer than indoor gatherings when the weather permits. If singing indoors, ensure leaders wear masks. Minimize indoor congregation singing and consider a smaller choir or worship team masked and socially distanced from the congregation. Indoor community shared meals pose a great risk and have become the cause of a growing number of COVID-19 outbreaks in our congregations. If you choose to host a meal, please be sure to take every possible precaution.

Friends in Christ, we are not where we hoped to be at this point in the pandemic. We hoped vaccinations would outpace variations of this virus. We hoped that masking, social distancing, and worship protocols would cease. Jesus gathers the flock and feeds us with a different kind of hope – a hope that Jesus is here right now healing, loving, and gathering us together. May we hold fast to the hope that comes from God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. With God's abundant grace, together we can lead in caring for the wellbeing of all God's children. A blessed Advent and Christmas to you.

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