

Bishop's Link

<https://youtu.be/B2PZUhKsbrY>

April 2021 COVID Update

Dear Friends in Christ in the Episcopal Diocese of Oklahoma: I send you my greetings this Eastertide. And even as we celebrate the Risen Christ and the sure and certain hope of resurrection that we have been given, I have good news to share about our COVID protocols, and how we will be able to gather together at Pentecost and beyond.

First, some background. Oklahoma is doing exceptionally well with our vaccinations. We have been consistently in the top ten nationally for COVID vaccinations per 100,000 residents. At the end of March, all adults in Oklahoma became eligible to receive the vaccine, and appointments are widely available throughout our state. Almost every adult who wishes to be vaccinated is now able to do so. At the same time, infections, hospitalizations, and deaths have plummeted from the highs a few months ago, and mask mandates are expiring everywhere, including in our major metro areas.

So far, the vaccine seems to be quite safe, and effective in preventing illness, especially severe illness, and minimizing spread. That is wonderful news, and a tribute to all of the scientists, government and community leaders, medical professionals, and volunteers who have developed and distributed this vaccine in record time. Because of this remarkable progress, and because the COVID guidelines are changing rapidly around us, in cities, towns, businesses, and other denominations, it is time for our diocese to move forward with a phased reduction of our own guidelines.

On Pentecost, May 23rd, we will remove all mandatory COVID protocols for congregations in the Episcopal Diocese of Oklahoma, except for the following four aspects: we will continue to wear masks, we will continue to sanitize our hands, and we will not have the chalice (the common cup), or indoor eating. Everything else is permitted as of May 23rd, including outdoor meals, nursery care, singing, use of books, in person meetings, and removing the social distancing requirements. Only masks, hand sanitizing, and the prohibitions on the chalice and indoor eating will continue.

Then, on July 17th, these last four COVID protocols will also expire.

Now, let me add a few caveats. I reserve the right to reinstate COVID protocols if things change drastically, for example if we have a large COVID variant spike in Oklahoma that is highly resistant to the vaccine. Also, this change in our diocesan mandates does not preclude local congregations from continuing your own COVID protocols, if you wish. Throughout this pandemic, one of my core principles has been to give our congregations as much flexibility as possible, knowing that the ministry contexts are so different across our diocese. In some of our small congregations, essentially everyone is vaccinated already. But some of our other congregations may wish, based on the thoughtful decisions of clergy and Vestry leadership, to extend some protocols a while longer. I strongly encourage all our congregations to continue to stream worship and use technology to include those who may not feel comfortable gathering in person.

I hope our newly developed use of technology will be with us always, as a tool for evangelism, pastoral care, and inclusion, allowing more people to participate in our worship and ministries. I also encourage the regular use of the outdoors, as weather permits. We know that COVID is almost exclusively transmitted inside. The more we are outside, in God's beautiful creation, the safer we will be from this illness.

Why July 17th for the end point? A couple of reasons. That is the last day of summer camp at Saint Crispin's, which has its own COVID guidelines. And secondly, it seems clear that by July 17, three months from now, every adult in our congregations will have had ample opportunity to be vaccinated. While our children will not, our most vulnerable people, and those most likely to have serious illness, will be.

Now, I know that some in our diocese will think this timeline is too slow, and others that it is too fast. But as I evaluate where we are in Oklahoma, I believe this is the right, prudent path, both for safety, and for the full reopening of our congregations. The same necessary protocols that have kept us safer from the virus, have separated us from one another, and diminished not only our connection with each other, but also our worship experience. It is time to reconnect and re-engage, and let the Holy Spirit move powerfully among us to renew our Church in the season after Pentecost. I close with an urgent request: I am asking all of our congregations to do everything within your power over the next three months to get all of your adult members fully vaccinated. We cannot require anyone to get the vaccine, but we can encourage it, we can talk about it in our Sunday announcements and newsletters. We can have signups and arrange rides for those who need them to vaccination sites. We can help those without computer access navigate the process and get registered. We can, together, get all who wish to in our congregations fully vaccinated before July 17, when the diocesan protocols expire. We can do this, to honor the more than 8,000 people we have lost to this awful pandemic in Oklahoma alone, some of them our friends, and family. I could not be more proud of how our diocese has navigated this pandemic.

It has been difficult, and scary, and painful, but our congregations and institutions have worked together to keep our people safe, while creatively finding ways to connect as best we could with one another, with the vulnerable, and with God. As we enter into this new phase, you can be assured of my love, my help, and my prayers.

Blessings, The Rt. Rev. Poulson Reed