



St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

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COVID Announcement for March 2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

Through Lent, we've been reading, reflecting, and discussing "What is Our Tomorrow?" We have reflected on our lives, particularly in the last two years, and what we can now expect for our future. Within that conversation, I've invited us to prepare for adjusting our expectations around protocols, particularly masking, distancing, and the use of the chalice.

This week, the bishop has now authorized us to share in the chalice.

With consultation from our COVID Task Force and vestry, I am pleased to offer updated guidance for St. Stephen's on these matters.

Masks Preferred

Beginning April 10 (Palm Sunday) we will *prefer* that people wear masks; they will no longer be required at Sunday services or congregational gatherings. Our local numbers for last week give us great confidence; however, the rapid rise of BA.2 is beginning this week. Therefore, it is our preference that we continue masking.

While many are comfortable with adjusting masking behavior when needed, *changing* expectations can put stress on an organization *and* for its people who cannot be confident in what is expected of them. So you are *encouraged* to mask in the building as we adjust to these new expectations and prepare for the expected rise in cases in the coming weeks.

Distancing

We have already resumed coffee hour and eating in the Great Hall. Beginning April 10, we will remove the enforced distancing in the worship space. When possible, all are encouraged to respect one another's space.

The Chalice

Beginning April 17 (Easter Day), we will resume the communal use of the chalice under the guidance of the bishop. For many, this is welcome relief. For others, this is an *additional* source of concern. While I will gladly espouse the relative safety of sharing the cup, I am also drawn to the challenge many will have in sharing it now. In this way, we should be abundantly clear:

No one is required to drink from the cup.

Wine does not “complete” Holy Communion.

The bread alone is sufficient.

Spiritual Communion is also effective.

If you choose to participate by sharing in the common cup this Easter, I also invite you to the following expectations:

1. For those who are able, we will continue to offer communion from the center aisle. A single chalice will be offered at 8:00. Two chalices will be offered at 10:00; one for each side of the room.
2. Therefore, we will not receive communion by kneeling at the altar rail.
3. **Intinction (dipping) will be forbidden.** While it is easier for some or a practice long-used by others, it is *significantly* less sanitary.
4. Communion in both *or either part* may be brought to you if you are unable to stand in line.

While the last two years have been a difficult road for all of us, I commend the adaptability and comity of the congregation, which has sought a wise and careful approach through the pandemic. Even as pressures have pushed us and divisions have drawn us, we have sought a path that would include the weakest among us so we *all* might thrive.

Most importantly, we have sought to build *consistent expectations* that have not fluctuated with local numbers, but have remained normative within the diocese and the wider Episcopal Church. We can all find places who have been more “open” than we are. Just as we can find congregations far more restricted. We can be certain that our prudence has been effective.

This new guidance represents an opportunity for the building of new norms. They come with the expectation that all persons will respect the dignity of all others. They come as a chance for celebration by some and as another current concern by others. For we must remember that we have vulnerable, unvaccinated members along with high-risk members and those experiencing long-covid-like symptoms.

Lastly, for the sake of clarity and in a spirit of generosity, I will share with you my own intentions.

Because I *remain* a potential vector for transmission to our most vulnerable *and* because public health indicators always lag infection rates, I will continue to mask for the time being. I am fully vaccinated, as is my family. For this same reason, I may also choose to abstain from sharing in the chalice.

As we near the end of this momentous Lenten season, a season of *discernment* and *discovery*, I wish to remind us once again of the invitation we receive on Ash Wednesday:

Dear People of God: The first Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church to prepare for them by a season of penitence and fasting. This season of Lent provided a time in which converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism. It was also a time when those who, because of notorious sins, had been separated from the body of the faithful were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness, and restored to the fellowship of the Church. Thereby, the whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith.

In Lent, we are preparing ourselves to welcome; for mercy; to be changed. As we have much discussed this year, yes, *We Shall Be Changed*. For we already are.

Grace and Peace,

Drew Downs

Rector

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