



Our Beloved Friends in Christ,

Do not neglect to meet together... Hebrews 10:25

I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some... 1 Corinthians 9:22

Over the past 12 months, the congregations and fellowships of this presbytery (and churches across the world) have struggled, been faithful, and shown great resilience. We know that for many of us exhaustion, frustration, and hardship are now constant companions. We are proud of you and that we are praying for you. With you, we long to be together. We love worshipping in person, caring for one another face to face, doing mission side-by-side – in short, meeting together.

God is always at work, bringing new hope out of disaster. This pandemic has required we learn new skills. We are being prepared for a new future– one that we did not anticipate just a year ago. Even as we prepare for resuming in-person activities, we can plan to provide ways for people to continue to be part of our communities virtually, when they cannot be present in-person. This advisory will offer our best counsel on the decisions you must make about current safety for in-person gatherings while the pandemic continues to rage. We also urge you to continue to use this time to plan for a thriving future and how to carry forward the new skills you have developed. We rejoice in the amazing ways you serve Christ’s people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.

The Current Pandemic Situation – February 2021

We hope that we are well on our way to the “New Normal.” While rocky in rollout, vaccine will soon be more widely available. Here in Pennsylvania, those in the 1A category are beginning to be vaccinated. Clergy and “essential staff in houses of worship” are in category 1B. The CDC assures us that by the fall all who are willing to be vaccinated will be vaccinated. By late summer or early fall, life should be returning to “full swing.”

But in Mid-February 2021, current conditions are still dangerous. At present, York, Lancaster, and Chester counties are in a state of “active outbreak,” with the number of new daily cases being too high, and the percentage of the population currently vaccinated too low to anticipate a state of containment in the near future. Even more alarming is the increasing threat of the new variants. Public Health and disease experts fear they will be more transmissible, deadlier, and potentially more resistant to the protection given by vaccines and previous infections. In fact, these experts warn that we are presently in the “eye of the hurricane.” While new cases,

hospitalizations and death rates are dropping right now, they fear another major surge in March and April, unless we all do our parts to “Stop the Spread.” The reasons cases are down in the moment is because people are doing their part to limit indoor gatherings and practice masking and social distancing.

In December 2020, the Leader Team and the Commission on Ministry of the Presbytery of Donegal issued a joint recommendation that congregations consider suspending in-person indoor gatherings through February 2021. This advice was issued at a time of dramatic rise in hospitalizations and deaths, causing the Commonwealth of PA issued more stringent mitigation measures. The natural question on the minds of many is, “What comes next?”

Up until this point, the Leaders of the Presbytery of Donegal have issued advisories for a few months into the future. We have forecast a future date, by which point we could reassess the wisdom of resuming in-person worship. This has had the unintended effect of creating for some the feeling of an ever-retreating horizon. In Mid-February, we hope that vaccinations will soon be widely available, but we are not there yet. We fear the as-yet unknown severity of the variants. We don't have a date to project. We believe the wisest choice is to move away from forecasting dates on the calendar and recommend that Sessions adopt specific data benchmarks that must be reached in order to resume in-person operations.

Most of our congregations are currently closed to indoors in-person activities. Some of our congregations have resumed indoors activities, while enforcing stringent mitigation measures. Some are providing creative options to gather outdoors. Some of you are making decisions with leaders who disagree strongly about how best to proceed. In fact, members of the Leader Team and The Connecting Our Ministry Commission (COM) hold different points-of-view. It took us some time to reach a majority agreement on this advisory. Some thought it was too strict. Others thought it wasn't strict enough. Holding together when decisions hold such high stakes requires maturity and forbearance. Every Session has proceeded prayerfully. We give thanks for you. If it would ever be helpful to have members from the Leader Team and/or COM to meet with your session, we are glad to do so.

Advisory from The Presbytery of Donegal Leader Team and Connecting Our Ministry Commission for March 2021 and Beyond

1. As the Leaders of the Presbytery, it is our duty to prioritize the health and wellness of churchgoers and our wider communities. Therefore, is our strong recommendation that congregations wait to resume In-Person Indoors activities until at least the “Safer to Gather” benchmarks are achieved.
2. The Presbytery of Donegal Leaders recommend that we encourage outdoor worship over indoor worship.

3. The Presbytery of Donegal Leaders further recommend that Sessions adopt their own specific benchmarks to decide when in-person gatherings are safe once again for their congregations. The metrics may be different for indoors and outdoors gatherings.
4. We also recognize that a number of our congregations have continued to gather in-person or will soon be resuming in-person activities. These congregations are in the company of businesses and schools that also are open, and we honor the ways that they have developed stringent plans for safety. We recommend that these congregations continue to follow diligently their safety protocols including.
 - a. Limiting indoors or outdoors attendance to the maximum numbers recommended by the state health department and the Centers for Disease Control.
 - b. Diligence with enforcing social distancing, mandatory face masks, limiting aerosols and droplets, attention to ventilation, limiting time spent in gatherings, minimizing touch of surfaces, frequent sanitization, and disinfection. Consider double masking in accordance with new CDC recommendations. See the previous Presbytery Advisories for more on recommendations for gatherings.
 - c. Adopting an agreement for benchmarks to suspend in-person gatherings, as well as backup plans for worship and activities.

Understanding Metrics as The Basis for a Plan for Resuming In-Person Activities

The resource we have found invaluable for developing data metrics comes from *Holding Our Plans Loosely: Returning to Church 2.0*, a publication of the Wisconsin Council of Churches www.wichurches.org/2021/01/14/returning-to-church/ This document and its predecessor have been widely disseminated by presbyteries, dioceses, judicatories, and other regional Church authorities throughout the country, in many ways making it the “gold-standard” for congregations and mid-councils navigating a path toward reopening. It offers the following parameters for determining the safety level of holding in-person worship:

UNSAFE TO GATHER

Vaccination Rates:

<50%

Viral Transmission:

-New Cases >10/100K

-Positive Tests >10%

MAKE IT SAFER

Vaccination Rates:

50-70+%

Viral Transmission:

- New Cases 5-10/100K

-Positive Tests <10%

SAFEST

Vaccination Rates:

70-85+%

Viral Transmission:

-New Cases <1/100K

-Positive Tests <5%

To gather data on the metrics in our counties, we utilize <https://covidactnow.org> a 501c3 in partnership with Georgetown University Center for Global Health Science and Security, Stanford University Clinical Excellence Research Center, and Harvard Global Health Institute, which mines its data from official local and state agencies, such as the County Health Departments. As of February 15th, the statistics for Chester, Lancaster and York counties are as follows:

CHESTER COUNTY

Vaccination Rates – 5.1% (1st Shot) - “Unsafe to Gather” category

New Cases – 22.1/100K – “Unsafe to Gather” category

Positive Tests 5.7% - “Make it Safer” category

LANCASTER COUNTY

Vaccination Rates – 4.9% (1st Shot) - “Unsafe to Gather” category

New Cases – 40.5/100K – “Unsafe to Gather” category

Positive Tests – 11.8% -- “Unsafe to Gather” category

YORK COUNTY

Vaccination Rates – 4.2% (1st Shot) - “Unsafe to Gather” category

New Cases – 35.3/100K – “Unsafe to Gather” category

Positive Tests – 12.2% - “Unsafe to Gather” category

Additional Information comes from the COVID Risk Level supplied from this site. All 3 counties are currently in the “ACTIVE OUTBREAK” category. Here is the description of Active Outbreak: *Chester/Lancaster/York Counties are either actively experiencing an outbreak or is at extreme risk. COVID cases are exponentially growing and/or County COVID preparedness is significantly below international standards.* (We also have one congregation in Harford County, Maryland, with similar metrics.)

In closing, we end where we began. We give thanks for each of our congregations, our pastors, our congregational leaders. One of our pastors currently signs all communications “We’re all in this Together.” And so, we are!

As always, we appreciate receiving the plans and communications that you have adopted. Many of your plans have helped another session to not have to “re-invent the wheel,” or in this case, the Covid plan.

On behalf of the Presbytery of Donegal Leader Team and Connecting Our Ministry Commission,



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Executive Presbyter



Rev. Dr. Michael Wilson
Stated Clerk



Rev. Sarah Kneier
Moderator of the Leader Team



Ruling Elder Stephanie Borger
Acting Chair, Connecting Our Ministry Commission