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The Right Reverend Dr. George R. Sumner, Bishop

May 13, 2021

Ascension, 2021

Dear Friends in Christ,

Greetings in the Name of the risen and ascended Lord Jesus. One year ago, I wrote you in the midst of a public health crisis that was just gathering steam. The lock-downs were ended, but a half a million more deaths were ahead of us. The state of our knowledge of the COVID-19 virus's behavior was in its most preliminary stage, with the ground shifting under our feet on what seemed like a weekly basis. We moved forward with outdoor worship and strictly limited indoor worship on the advice of laypersons who possessed medical and scientific backgrounds and were truly born to serve the Church in such a time as this. We trusted in our commitment to disciplines which protected the health of our brothers and sisters in Christ, such as masks, and in our solidarity with those whose communities were facing more significant threats from the virus. Last fall, we allowed parishes to contextualize their COVID disciplines by following the practices of their local school districts. Again, we trusted one another and those who bear the responsibility of government in this and every county, and as losses mounted in some places while others were spared through their privilege or discipline, we rejoiced with those who rejoiced, and indeed wept with those who wept.

We prayed for a vaccine, led most notably by my friend and co-worker in the Gospel, Bishop Michael Smith, who made that petition such a prominent focus of his intercessions at innumerable zoom meetings. In God's mercy and steadfast love, these prayers were answered. We began to prepare to leave this "wilderness" time in our corporate life and re-emerge with a passionate zeal for mission – both to the poor who became undeniably visible in vehicular food lines, and to the many souls for whom the pandemic posed a deep personal challenge and exposed an even deeper spiritual yearning for meaning and community.

Which brings us to this moment, in which once again the ground seems to be shifting under our feet, but this time in the direction of a homecoming which can be so much better than a “new normal.” **Given the success of the vaccination effort in the communities of this Diocese, and in light of the new guidance from the CDC on mask-wearing for fully vaccinated persons, I am now giving permission for clergy in charge to determine their own mask and capacity policy in all worship and ministry settings – indoor and outdoor -- effective this Sunday, May 16, 2021.** Please note that I am not requiring masks to be optional, and that the **CDC still recommends masks for the unvaccinated indoors** (as well as the immune compromised). As always, each member should feel free to make the decision is best for themselves. Furthermore, I extend this permission with the solemn expectation that **parish leaders will abide by the practices of their local public school district in their own protocols for activities regarding children and youth** (who remain among the unvaccinated). There remain other questions about which I will have more to say later. Dean Price, as Canon for Congregations, has done a modicum of research regarding best practices in settings like Camp Allen’s summer camp program, and he would welcome a call or email to discuss them with you if that would be a helpful resource or point of comparison.

I give thanks to God for every one of you who have been a shepherd to God’s people in this crowded hour. Your faithfulness has been an inspiration and support to me through our wilderness wanderings, and I bid your prayers for me as we all lean in to all those good works that God has prepared for us to walk in.

With every blessing of the anointing Spirit,

Peace,

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The Rt. Rev. Dr. George R. Sumner
Bishop of Dallas