

March 12, 2021

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!" - Psalm 122:1

We are entering a new phase in this time of living with COVID-19. More and more people, particularly those over the age of 65, are receiving vaccinations. The science indicates that the vaccines are helping people either to avoid getting the virus, or if they do get COVID-19, the vaccines lessen the severity of the disease, keeping most people out of hospitals and protecting them from death. As a result, worshippers who have been longing to return to in-person worship are beginning to feel that now is the time. Many are hoping to return to worshipping indoors, in the sacred space of their congregation's sanctuary. Others are planning for hybrid worship, available both to those who attend in-person, and to those who will worship online.

I, too, look forward to the day when we can safely worship together. But I want to caution all of us that the virus is still looking for hosts, and not everyone has received the vaccine. Many of our pastors, deacons, and worship leaders, are still not eligible to receive the vaccine. I am 63 years old, with no underlying health issues, and so am not yet eligible for a shot. That may be the case for your pastor, deacon, musician, or anyone who helps lead worship. Jesus gave us two great commandments: Love God and love your neighbor. Loving your neighbor means, in this case, not putting them at undue risk of disease by asking them to meet indoors for in-person worship if they have not yet been vaccinated.

I also know there are those in our congregations who question whether they will receive the vaccine. There are a variety of reasons for this concern, and while I would argue that the science backs those who trust the vaccine, I do not want to assume that all in our congregations are as anxious to receive a shot as I am. Listening to your congregation and assessing where they are in terms of being protected from the virus will help guide you in the decision as to when to re-open for indoor worship.

As I have done since the beginning of the pandemic, I encourage you to follow state health protocols as you consider meeting for indoor, in-person worship. The Supreme Court decision that allows for indoor worship based on the First Amendment does not require that churches hold services in-person or indoors. I would continue to encourage that our congregations follow state health guidelines.

In California on the day I am writing this, March 12, 2021, all four of our church's counties: Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and San Diego, are still in the purple tier. In this tier, outdoor worship only is allowed. However, it looks as if all four counties could move to the less restrictive red tier soon, depending on how quickly vaccines are distributed in communities hardest hit by the virus. (To learn more about this, put in your search engine "San Bernardino County COVID tier outlook" for San Bernardino, or use any county name, and a number of news reports will explain how all this works). In the red tier, congregations can reopen for indoor worship at 25% capacity under public health guidelines.

In Hawai'i, the islands have fewer public health restrictions due to lower rates of disease transmission. Each of the islands has different recommendations for places of worship. In general, Hawai'i public health guidelines continue to recommend the wearing of masks and physical distancing. I have found throughout the pandemic that the pastors in Hawai'i are more knowledgeable than I about the local requirements, so I defer to their wisdom.

If you are moving toward in-person, indoor worship, please put together a written plan to reduce the transmission of the disease. California pastors can find guidance [here](#). Also, a helpful Holy Week and Easter guide put out by an ecumenical group to help churches plan worship can be found [here](#). Among the contributors to this guide is Bishop Kevin Strickland of the Southeastern

Synod, who used to serve in the Office of Presiding Bishop as Executive for Worship in the ELCA. I am hopeful these two resources will be helpful as you plan for future in-person, indoor worship services.

Again, please keep in mind those who are not yet protected from the virus. Wind instruments and in-person singing are still not safe as the virus is transmitted by aerosols that are propelled long distances through these activities, so keep that in mind as you plan for in-person services. Think through carefully what would make communion safe, particularly how to proclaim the good news "the body of Christ given for you, the blood of Christ shed for you." Do what you can to gather to give thanks to God and to let your people receive the hope and help that worship provides. But do so in a way that will not endanger their physical health, nor the health of those with whom they are in contact.

God bless you in preparing to return to in-person worship. I look forward to the day when we can sing together the words of Psalm 122: I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord."

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Andy Taylor/he, him, his
Pacifica Synod of the ELCA