

A weary world rejoices

December 21, 2021

Dear Friends of the Diocese of Washington,

Of all the carols we'll sing this week, the above refrain from *O Holy Night* may best sum up how we feel. The reality of another highly contagious COVID variant is fatiguing, to say the least, and tragically life-threatening for some.

I write with guidance for how to safely celebrate Christmas in our congregations and among our family and friends. The following insights are from Dr. Tara Palmore, Professor of Infectious Diseases at George Washington University Medical School and former hospital epidemiologist at the National Institute of Health.

Dr. Palmore told us that while the omicron variant is highly contagious and evades immunity (i.e., that those who have had COVID could get it again), *wearing properly fitted masks is an effective way to guard against both spreading and catching the virus.*

Super spreader events, she emphasized, are social gatherings of the unmasked. Where there is universal mask wearing, there may be sporadic spread, but there will not be widespread transmission. In other words, when we all wear masks, while not eliminated, the risk of transmission is low. *Most infections are not the result of work-related activity or gatherings where all are masked, but of social settings where we let down our guard.*

As you prepare for Christmas services and into January, I ask you to do the following:

- Provide surgical masks for all who enter, encouraging those without N95 masks to double mask.
- Make an announcement as worship begins, encouraging all to ensure that their mask is on properly, covering both mouth and nose.
- Consider refraining, for now, from indoor social gatherings at church in which people remove their masks to eat and drink.

Dr. Palmore noted that congregational singing while masked is a low-risk activity, provided all are wearing their masks properly. If someone next to you is singing unmasked, your risks are still low if your mask is on properly.

The District of Columbia, Montgomery, and Prince George's counties have all reinstated indoor mask mandates, which includes churches. Charles and St. Mary's counties recommend indoor masking, but as of this writing they have not reinstated mask mandates.

I trust that all our congregations will abide by their local ordinances, and I hope we will go the extra mile in compliance and safety, out of love for our neighbor and concern for health care workers who have been stretched

beyond their limits by this pandemic. And I give thanks that nearly all our congregations are equipped to offer online worship for those who cannot venture out.

When traveling or on social outings, Dr. Palmore urged us to be especially mindful of mask wearing, hand-washing, and social distancing in this highly infectious season. Pay attention to the first symptoms of COVID, she said, which can present like a common cold or allergies, and get tested.

Thankfully, the risk of severe illness and death is greatly reduced among the vaccinated, and especially those who have received their booster shot. Still, in family gatherings and other social events, we must always keep in mind the risk to the elderly, immuno-compromised, and unvaccinated, especially children.

The world, indeed, is weary. Yet the birth of Jesus reminds us that new life is still possible in the most unexpected places. Thank you for all your efforts to lead our people well. With God's grace and because of you, our Christmas celebrations will still be occasions of deep meaning and hope.

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mariann", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde