**A Theological Context for Discerning Expansion of Church Activity**

This document was created at the direction of the Bishop as a joint effort of the ad hoc diocesan clergy Health and Liturgy/Theology Committees.

Throughout this pandemic we have placed our commitment to safeguard everyone’s health and safety at the core of our decision making and protocols.  At times this has not always been easy to discern as we have grappled with a variety of questions which sometimes seem to pit one moral good against another.  Yet now the variables are changing.  Many of us are vaccinated which, while a great blessing, also raises new questions as to what we should and should not do.  What follows is a brief attempt to articulate some of the theological and ethical issues that are currently at play.  We hope that it serves as a resource as you consider what to do moving forward and helps in offering explanations to parishioners who may be struggling in understanding or accepting church leadership decisions.

**Relevant Core Values**

**Our lives have value**

We are lovingly made by God in God’s own image.  We were then lovingly redeemed through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.  Therefore, our lives have meaning and value which is beyond anything that we ourselves can bestow.  It is our sacred obligation to honor and protect life.

**God gifted us with freedom and autonomy**

God granted us the ability to make choices for ourselves.  Such freedom should be respected.

**We are called to love our neighbor as ourselves**

Following the teaching and example of Jesus, we are called to love our neighbor as fully as we love ourselves.  We must always consider their needs and at times place those needs on par with or even above our own.

**We are called to protect the powerless**

Throughout scripture God calls the faithful to protect and care for those who cannot do so for themselves.  Considering and providing for the needs of the marginalized and disenfranchised is an essential expression of our faith.

**We are one Body**

We who are many are one body.  In Christ we find not only a shared faith but also a shared identity.  While our diversity is a great gift, we must always be mindful of and act to strengthen our common identity.

**Application**

With these values in mind, we should continue to prioritize protecting people’s health and safety as well as our unity (but not necessarily unanimity).   For a variety of reasons (theological, ethical and legal), apart from paid staff and volunteers whose ministry puts them (or others) at high-risk, we cannot make church participation contingent on vaccination. No one enjoys wearing a mask or distancing from one another. However, since we generally won’t know if everyone present has been vaccinated, we should continue to prioritize finding ways that allow everyone to participate without fear of exclusion.   It is also essential to be mindful of those who cannot be vaccinated which currently include children under 12 and others with varying medical conditions. This not only protects current parishioners but also any guests and visitors whose status we do not know.

At the same time, there will come a point when it is reasonable to conclude that all those who are eligible and who want to be vaccinated have been vaccinated and those who have not yet been vaccinated may never choose to receive it.  When that point is reached (and this will vary from church to church), it may be reasonable to allow people to assume the risk for themselves and loosen restrictions in accordance with medical and scientific guidance. The only factor that is still to be determined is when children are able to be vaccinated.