

NEPS Pandemic Update – December 2021

The Latest Situation:

The Covid-19 pandemic continues to generate fear, concern, confusion and division across the country and within our own Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod. The most recent developments – some troubling, some hopeful – include:

- The rise of new variants, especially “omicron”;
- The ongoing and in many cases, increasing numbers of new cases;
- The continued reluctance and refusal of some to get vaccinated, or to wear masks;
- On the good side: the increased opportunities for testing, for boosters, and for vaccines for all ages.

Here in our Synod, I now encourage us to use another trustworthy source of information to help guide our decisions concerning the pandemic: the [“Covid Act Now Coalition.”](#) This non-profit, web-based resource brings together non-partisan experts in medicine, law, and public policy, to provide objective data and analysis. Their website is being consulted as a reliable source by synods and congregations across the ELCA. From their site, we can see clearly that things are still very threatening here in NE Penn: all 14 of our counties have threat levels of “VERY HIGH” or “SEVERE” – Berks, Carbon, Lehigh, Northampton, and Schuylkill all are in that worst category. Additionally, the vaccination rate is at or below 60% for 7 of those 14 counties. Most of these numbers are worse than the data for many of our neighboring synods, including the Southeastern Penn Synod, whose leaders have nonetheless chosen to put in place stricter guidelines than we have. I believe we can become safer and return to “normal” sooner if we follow their lead.

Dr. Luther Shows The Way:

Almost exactly 500 years ago – in November 1520 – Martin Luther published one of his most ground-breaking treatises: *“On the Freedom of a Christian.”* He begins the document with this famous declaration: *“A Christian is the most free lord of all, subject to none. And a Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone.”*

He goes on to describe how God, through Christ’s sacrificial love for us on the cross, has granted us the grace and the freedom to make our own decisions; but this freedom does not release us to disregard the truth, or our call to care and concern for our neighbor. Luther writes: *“Therefore [Christians] should be guided in all [their] works by this thought and contemplate this one thing alone, that [they] may serve and benefit others in all that [they do], considering nothing except the need and the advantage of [the] neighbor.”*

So “what does this mean?” The inconvenience of mask wearing; and even the threat of temporary cold-and-flu reactions to vaccinations – these are simply the sacrifices we are called to make, as “the dutiful servants of all, subject to everyone.” It is within this traditionally and theologically Lutheran framing that we maintain our vigilance; and update our guidelines here.

Latest Synod Recommendations:

As we prepare for the larger crowds of Christmas Eve – and with Lent, Holy Week and Easter not far away – I am recommending the starting, the continuation, or the resumption, of any and all common-sense and good-neighbor precautions, including:

- Proof of vaccination or a negative test for all indoor events
- Indoor masking
- Good air circulation, including open windows where feasible
- Social distancing, frequent washing and other effective protocols

Furthermore – at their January 15 meeting, I am encouraging our Synod Council to discuss and decide upon further appropriate actions, **which may include mandates that all Synod-sponsored indoor events** require masking, proof of vaccination, and/or proof of a negative test. As the duly elected governing body of this Synod, your Synod Council has the right and responsibility to make these decisions for Synod gatherings. When it comes to our individual worshipping communities, our authority is more limited; Synod Council (and myself) can only make clear and strong recommendations – based on the best science, on good conscience and on our common love for our neighbors, especially those who are most vulnerable. In other words, all congregations have the “freedom of a Christian” to decide for themselves how they will choose to act – or refuse to act. I invite us all to follow our baptismal call and Lutheran heritage, to follow God’s will and God’s love for all.

In God’s Love,
Bishop Christopher deForest

Links below to [Covid Act Now](#) site, to see the latest pandemic numbers for all our NE PA Synod Counties (“risk levels” and “vaccination rates” listed here are for Dec 12, 2021):

For Berks County	(risk level: SEVERE – vaccination rate 60%)
For Bradford County	(risk level: SEVERE – vaccination rate 42%)
For Carbon County	(risk level: SEVERE – vaccination rate 61%)
For Lackawanna County	(risk level: VERY HIGH – vaccination rate 72%)
For Lehigh County	(risk level: SEVERE – vaccination rate 73%)
For Luzerne County	(risk level: VERY HIGH – vaccination rate 64%)
For Monroe County	(risk level: VERY HIGH – vaccination rate 59%)
For Northampton County	(risk level: SEVERE – vaccination rate 68%)
For Pike County	(risk level: VERY HIGH – vaccination rate 57%)
For Schuylkill County	(risk level: SEVERE – vaccination rate 60%)
For Sullivan County	(risk level: SEVERE – vaccination rate 58%)
For Susquehanna County	(risk level: SEVERE – vaccination rate 44%)
For Wayne County	(risk level: VERY HIGH – vaccination rate 62%)
For Wyoming County	(risk level: SEVERE – vaccination rate 63%)