



# OFFICE OF THE BISHOP OF NIAGARA

## ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA

December 21, 2021

### TO THE PEOPLE OF THE DIOCESE OF NIAGARA

*Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.  
I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."*

*You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day,  
nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,  
nor the plague that destroys at midday.*

*A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand,  
but it will not come near you, . . .*

- Psalm 91

Dear friends:

You will have heard by now that I have made the difficult decision to shutter our churches for public worship as a preventative measure against the unrestrained spread of the Omicron variant of concern which is circulating in our midst.

This is a hard time. We are being asked to dig very deep to accede to this moment with strength and maturity. The psalm quoted above, is one of assurance. It's about trust in the power of God to guide and fortify us in the face of fear. God is called a fortress and a refuge – places of protection and shelter. Well, we have need of both in this moment.

But we are not helpless. Added to this deep trust is the use of the good judgement and common sense gifted to us as God's beloved children. So, equipped with these abilities and God's steadfast presence and care, we move forward into this next chapter of the pandemic.

It seems amazing that a scant three weeks ago, the word Omicron was not in our lexicons. Yet as I write to you, the number of cases in Ontario from this now predominant variant are doubling every two or three days, with case counts in our diocese rising to levels we haven't seen since the third wave of the pandemic.

The extent of transmission in our communities has led many to urgently call for a set of new guidelines to act as a "circuit breaker" to slow infection and buy time to ramp up vaccination efforts. We are doing our part to contribute to this effort even as we place our trust in God.

We know the reality we are facing. We are in the midst of something dangerous and seismic – and the prudent and loving thing to do is to strive to protect us all – from the youngest who are as yet still unvaccinated and vulnerable, to the most senior who are similarly at risk.

And so, we must lean into the core element of our faith – sacrificial love – and proactively become an online worshipping community once more, for a season.

Once more, however, with a difference. You see, we know things about ourselves and about this virus that we did not know before.

We know now how to be the face and hands of Christ in ministry in this diocese through the peak of a pandemic wave. Through online worship, food security and anti-isolation ministries, and Zoom meetings and fellowship, the mission of God continues to flourish regardless of case counts and restrictions.

We also now know that we are going to be living with COVID-19 and its variants for a while yet, but that there is a seasonality too. This is good knowledge, for it is healthy to be pragmatic about what is needed for the long haul and that the hardships of this present moment will not be forever.

But if I may, there are a few things we are still learning about in this time.

One is about discipleship and in particular how we steward our resources. Stewardship is an outworking of our belief in Jesus Christ. It is enduring support for the ministry of his gathered community of followers – the Church. It is not an occasion for situational giving, nor is stewardship to be seen as a fee for service. The work of the Church in coming alongside God's mission of love continues whether we attend church physically or not. Please remember that the obligation of faith requires that we must give sacrificially and generously in this time.

The other necessary learning is about how we care for our leaders. This has been an extraordinary time for our faithful wardens, clergy, treasurers, and any who serve in our parishes in a leadership capacity. They have shouldered heavy burdens and, in all things, they have done their best to cope with all that they are called to bear. They have also absorbed much of the stress, the grief, and the attendant anger and frustration of this time. While much has been given up to the Lord, this stress is in evidence at times and it is a sorrow.

Therefore, I must make a special plea to us all to support our leaders and to restrain our own feelings lest they contribute to the unprecedented stress of these times and result in destructive outcomes. We must outdo ourselves in loving one another.

Friends, this is a hard time. Nothing I can say can take that away. But I can echo the message of the angel Gabriel who reminded us not to fear but to trust in God's promises. As a sign of God's love, the Christ comes among us as one of us to walk this earth: to love us, to teach us, to heal us and ultimately to save us so that we might understand what God's love is like and how through us, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, it can transform this world. This is the incredible love we celebrate in the coming days.

Lastly, please know that you are in my prayers. I give thanks to God for you, and for your constant witness to Jesus' Way of Love, especially through these darkest of nights. We will get through this – together – with strength and power and unity in Christ.

Every blessing for a safe and peace-filled Christmas to you and all those you love.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Susan Niagara". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell  
Bishop of Niagara