



COVID-19 Response Information, Inspiration & Prayer

The Presbytery of Ohio Valley



Dear Friends in Christ:

One of the items on the Presbytery Council's agenda at our most recent meeting was to consider our guidance to congregations concerning COVID-19 precautions. While each Session has the authority to make decisions on behalf of the congregation, we offer the following information, resources, and guidance. Type that is underlined and blue will lead you to a website where you can find additional information.

What's happening on the vaccine front?

There is much good news to report. Three vaccines – Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson – have received emergency use authorization. People twelve years of age and older are eligible to receive a vaccine. We encourage everyone who is eligible and able to get a vaccine as soon as possible. In doing so, you protect both yourself and your community at large. If you have questions or concerns, please speak with your health care provider. You may also learn more about the vaccines in this [COVID-19 Vaccine FAQ](#).

What's the latest CDC guidance?

Because the vaccines are proving to be very effective, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have issued a new advisory, "[Interim Public Health Recommendations for Fully Vaccinated People](#)" The key provisions are that fully vaccinated people can:

- Resume activities without wearing masks or physically distancing, except where required by federal, state, local, tribal, or territorial laws, rules, and regulations, including local business and workplace guidance.
- Resume domestic travel and refrain from testing before or after travel or self-quarantine after travel.
- Refrain from testing before leaving the United States for international travel (unless required by the destination) and refrain from self-quarantine after arriving back in the United States.
- Refrain from testing following a known exposure, if asymptomatic, with some exceptions for specific settings.
- Refrain from quarantine following a known exposure if asymptomatic.
- Refrain from routine screening testing if feasible.

Please click here to see an [infographic of what is safe and less safe](#) for fully vaccinated people and unvaccinated people. As you see, guidance for non-vaccinated people remains the same: wear face coverings and practice social distancing.

What are the implications for congregational gatherings?

In some of our smaller congregations everyone knows everyone, and everyone knows that everyone has been fully vaccinated. As long as there's not a visitor in the mix, it would appear safe to gather as they gathered before the pandemic.

In most of our congregations, however, such certainty is not possible. For those congregations, we see two reasonable options:

Option One: Face Masks Optional for Vaccinated People and Required for Non-Vaccinated People. In this option, those who are not vaccinated, including children over the age of two, must continue to wear face masks. Those who are fully vaccinated – meaning two weeks after their last vaccine shot – may remove face masks when in attendance at worship and other church events. The advantage to this option is that it gives more freedom and a sense of normalcy to those who are vaccinated. The disadvantage is that it creates a sharp divide between those who may remove face masks, and those who may not. Another downside is that it relies upon the “honor system” that those who remove their face masks are fully vaccinated. If those who are not vaccinated decide to remove their face masks “anyhow,” they could put people who are immunocompromised at risk.

Option Two: Everyone Continues to Wear Face Masks in Worship and Other Large Gatherings Until the CDC Issues Relaxed Guidance for Unvaccinated People. The advantage to this option, is that everyone is “treated the same” in worship. The unvaccinated are not singled out, including kids and those who are unable to be vaccinated. It preserves worship as a safe space for those who are immunocompromised. Those with immune issues have found their freedom curtailed by the sudden lifting of face mask orders, and the fear that some who remove face masks may not be vaccinated. The disadvantage to a face mask required policy is that it limits those who are fully vaccinated from resuming “normal” life without a face mask.

Of course, a *Session may choose not to require face masks at all*. That is the Session's prerogative, ***but the Presbytery Council does not recommend it***.

What about singing?

The CDC [Infographic](#) on what is safe for those who are vaccinated and those who are not vaccinated makes it clear that the CDC believes someone who is fully vaccinated may sing unmasked in a church choir (and therefore at a church service.) It is not regarded as safe for those who are not vaccinated to sing in church, although singing softly behind a face mask (and singing fewer hymns and fewer verses) is safer than singing without a face mask.

Anything else?

Again, while there is much good news and many reasons for hope, it is important to remember that *the pandemic is not over*. People continue to contract the coronavirus. Some develop symptoms. Some require hospitalization. And some die.

As Sessions make these difficult decisions, we encourage you to be aware of the statistics in your local area. The [State of Indiana](#) has county-by-county information available, as does the website [CovidActNow](#).

We thank you for your time and attention to this matter, and for all the ways that you seek to be faithful in these strange and unsettling times. We continue to long for and hope for the day when we will see one another with uncovered face, when we will be able to sing together and share a meal together, when we will be able to serve side-by-side. Most of all, however, we hope that we will continue to exercise sound judgement and strong faith, waiting on the Lord, who gives us all that we need in every circumstance.

On behalf of the Presbytery Council —
Peace and all good,

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