



UPDATED ADVICE AND COUNSEL FOR RETURNING TO IN-PERSON GATHERINGS IN THE DELAWARE-MARYLAND SYNOD, ELCA

Office of the Bishop
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The promise of returning to in-person gatherings brings with it the joyful anticipation of coming back together in beloved church buildings and the sober duty of being prepared to do so safely. Each congregation and ministry bear the responsibility to conduct its ministry in faithfulness to the joy of the Gospel and in care for the safety of its members, community and neighbors. Likewise, each congregation and ministry have a distinct context in which to exercise the Church's mission.

CDC GUIDELINES

The most updated CDC Guidelines, [Interim Public Health Recommendations for Fully Vaccinated People | CDC](#), are just that – recommendations for *fully vaccinated people*. We continue to be mindful that not all of those who participate in our congregations and ministries are vaccinated, wish to be vaccinated, and might not have access to vaccinations due to health conditions, age, etc. In some of our congregations and ministries, “everyone” is vaccinated – but we don't *know* that, and we are not permitted to demand proof of vaccination.

Fully vaccinated means: 2 weeks after their second dose in a 2-dose series, such as the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines, or 2 weeks after a single-dose vaccine, such as Johnson & Johnson's Janssen vaccine.

STATE AND LOCAL JURISDICTIONAL GUIDELINES – AND CONTEXT

Coordinate your efforts with the Governor's guidelines and timing. Even when your jurisdiction permits in-person indoor gatherings for increasing numbers of people, remember that you have both the freedom and responsibility to wait until you are ready to do so safely before offering in-person gatherings inside your facilities. Even when the government suggests that there should be no restrictions, there are church-specific concerns that are not anticipated by those guidelines, ie. some of our indoor places of worship are small, do not have functioning windows – or adequate ventilation, we eat and drink at the Lord's Table, and we sing (which is, the CDC has suggested, a behavior that carries significant risk of transmission).

THOSE WHO ARE STILL AT HIGH RISK SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED TO STAY HOME

It is not appropriate for some vulnerable populations to gather for in-person, indoor worship and activities. Providing accessibility online is going to continue to be an ongoing concern and responsibility. If you are unable to maintain online or hybrid opportunities, perhaps point participants who are not yet safe to return to in-person gatherings to other partner congregations and ministries who are sustaining online opportunities for worship, learning, etc.

MAINTAIN REGISTRATION

In our synod, we have had Covid exposure in worship even as recently as the last two weeks – though, gratefully no report of transmission during worship, learning, fellowship or service in any of our places of ministry. Please continue to maintain a registration of those who are present for in-person gatherings so that contact tracing can be done effectively in partnership with the local health department. To be candid, registration also helps in our evangelism and pastoral care efforts as we keep track of who has returned to an in-person gathering, who is still connected online – and to whom we have some responsibility to reconnect and check-in.

DISTANCING IS STILL WISE

Retain signage and verbiage about physical distancing in your gatherings. One concession might be not intervening in instances when people congregate or socialize at distances less than 3 to 6 feet. Perhaps allow that people will self-regulate based on vaccination status and comfort level.

MASKING IS STILL ENCOURAGED, EVEN IF NOT REQUIRED

One of our congregations captured this beautifully in their updated signage: *Out of an abundance of love, respect, and concern for those who are unvaccinated, especially our children, we are asking that all worshippers continue to wear masks while inside the building. Thank you.* (Grace, Westminster)

A way to live into less restrictive masking requirements might be to indicate in worship materials that worship leaders who have been vaccinated will remove their masks while they are in the chancel, but will put them back on when they are back in the congregation. My personal practice is to wear a mask, even if the congregation or ministry doesn't require them, to normalize that and model solidarity with those who chose to – or need to – continue to be masked (though I do remove my mask, where it is permitted, to preach – I've come to realize that for many of our people "hear" better seeing our faces, lips and facial expressions).

Some are allowing vaccinated people to remove their masks, once they are seated, at their discretion. A few congregations are leaving up distancing markers in some sections of their seating to provide people who wish greater distancing that opportunity within the body of the assembly.

SINGING IN WORSHIP

More and more of our congregations are increasing the amount of singing in which their community is participating comfortably. Caution and moving gradually seems to be best practice. A significant number of our places of worship have begun to sing with masks in place; very few are signing in-doors, unmasked, as a congregation. Those who are, often, introduced the practice back gradually – and are still restricting the number of hymns, and selecting a few verses to be sung.

OFFERING

The practice of collecting an offering at the doors to the church, or the center aisle, or by providing electronic giving options are still a better practice than "passing the plate." Theologically, it is not a good practice collect an offering at the chancel rail or "on the way" to receiving communion.

SHARING OF THE PEACE

Physical contact at the sharing of the peace is still not encouraged. While one does not want to become the “peace police,” an encouraging word about respecting boundaries and not presuming that “everyone” is comfortable with handshaking or hugging is helpful.

HOLY COMMUNION

Increasing numbers of our congregations and ministries are beginning to return to communion practices apart from the pre-packaged kits some used to mitigate the pandemic restrictions. The handling of prepackaged kits in many places also give a false security about how much more “safe” or “hygienic” they appear to be.

Reminded of our ELCA sacramental practices statement, [The Use of the Means of Grace](#), *Practices of distributing and receiving Holy Communion reflect the unity of the Body of Christ and the dignity and new life of the baptized*; we return to communion practices that are not “disposable,” offer the normative communion elements of bread and wine (or, for pastoral reasons, grape juice), and embody the unity of those receiving the sacrament. While the use of the common cup is not yet recommended – and intinction remains problematic (too many fingers in the cup), communion in one kind with plenty of hand sanitation is widely being practiced, the use of a pouring chalice has been reintroduced in many places as a sign of sacramental unity, and the use of individual glasses has been used effectively, as well.

As Lutheran Christians, and a Creation Care Synod, we should question the environmental impact of our communion practices, ie. “disposable” cups and prepackaged communion kits create a lot of irreverent waste. Even if your congregation or ministry adopted such a practice during the pandemic, perhaps now is the time to walk that back – or plan for how you will, as supplies are exhausted.

HYMNALS, PEW CUSHIONS, ETC.

Current guidelines suggest that it is permissible to return hymnals and pew cushions, etc., to their places. The corona virus does not live long on surfaces, and these surfaces are often unused for six days in between gatherings. If you have multiple weekend liturgies where hymnals might be used, you might consider alternating rows (ie. pews 1, 3 and 5 are for the early service; pews 2, 4 and 6 for the late service).

FELLOWSHIP

In many places, there is a deep desire to return to fellowship and “coffee hour.” While care should be taken, some of our congregations and ministries have done a really fine job in offering these opportunities by having them outside or in large fellowship spaces; offering prepackaged, boxed or individually plated food; or making space for “bring your own” fellowship times. Offering many options so that people feel comfortable with staying, or not; spacing, or not; etc., seems to be working in the limited contexts where this is already happening.

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

It is time to be planning for Christian Education. The best advice and counsel I can offer, particularly for ministry with children and adolescents, is to watch the practices of the local school district and adapt it for your context. Be mindful that attention spans have changed, that tolerance for screen time is largely exhausted, and that parents/guardians are not of one mind about vaccinations, masks and comfort with in-person classroom gatherings. As you make plans, seek the advice and counsel of teachers, parents and students for how to adapt or change previous practices as we approach the autumn and the new school year.

RISK MANAGEMENT AND THE “PANERA” PRACTICE

In fulfillment of our deep desire to make our places of worship, fellowship, education and service as safe and welcoming for as many people as possible, we recognize that what we are doing is the work of risk management. Any in-person gathering has some inherent risk, however we mitigate those risks by the decisions to maintain levels of restriction on what had been our “normal” practices.

The counsel from the CDC and other reputable sources is the “Pick Two” (hence the “Panera” allusion) best practices of choosing masking, distancing or being outdoors. Two of the three are considered a healthier level of risk management as congregations continue to lean into in-person gatherings as normative practice.

CONCLUSION

It will come as no surprise that the dictum, *plan the work and work the plan* will be repeated to close this updated *Advice and Counsel*. Leading, whether ordained or lay, within a ministry calls for just that, collaborative leadership. It is not appropriate for us to behave or imply that “Covid is over, do whatever you want.” We have a responsibility to be leaders among leaders to care for the collective whole of those in our care.

While no one can say definitively when the pandemic will be “over,” it would be fair and encouraging for us to plan for “more normal” practices and return more familiar patterns of gathering early in the autumn. We will, of course, have to be nimble in responding to prevailing conditions, our contexts and governmental directives.

As bishop of our synod, I am overwhelmed with gratitude for all the faithful ways our pastors, deacons, lay staff and lay leaders have stewarded the ministry of the church and mysteries of God’s grace during these extraordinary times. The church has not abdicated being the church during these perilous days, and in fact, in many places has risen-up in our high calling to be the body of Christ for the sake of this world God so loves. There has not been any case of Covid 19 transmission traceable to worship gatherings in our synod – and that speaks to the important work you’ve done to maintain health and safety in the places where you lead. Thank you and thanks be to God for you.

I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴ constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵ because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

-Philippians 1.3-6

RESOURCES

I continue to be grateful for the resources and guidance of our churchwide organization, including the regularly updated public health worship resources:

<https://www.elca.org/publichealth>

While our polities differ, I am thankful for the comprehensive work of my Roman Catholic colleagues in the Diocese of Wilmington: <https://www.cdow.org/fresh/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/COVID-Guidance-May-21-2021.pdf>; as well as in the Archdiocese of Baltimore: [COVID-19-Comprehensive-Summation-Document-as-of-5.28.2021_TA.pdf](https://www.archbalt.org/COVID-19-Comprehensive-Summation-Document-as-of-5.28.2021_TA.pdf) ([archbalt.org](https://www.archbalt.org)).

Our Episcopal Colleagues in the Diocese of Maryland have also shared some creative resources, as well: <https://episcopalmaryland.org/covid-19-response/>