



THE EPISCOPAL
DIOCESE OF
MISSOURI

UPDATED GUIDANCE *for* GATHERINGS *in*
the EPISCOPAL DIOCESE *of* MISSOURI
EFFECTIVE JULY 15, 2021



INTRODUCTION

These revised guidelines replace all previous protocols and reflect current policy of the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri effective July 15, 2021.

In recent weeks, as Pandemic Task Force members and staff in the Bishop's Office have been assisting parishes in obtaining variances under the provision of the June 1, 2021 guidelines, a hopeful piece of data has revealed itself in an otherwise discouraging statewide COVID-19 vaccination environment. Several of our parishes, through anonymous surveys, have discovered that the percentage of vaccinated parishioners over age 12 attending worship **significantly exceeds statewide numbers**, with many exceeding 90%. In assisting parishes in this work, we discovered several of the churches in our diocese have a microenvironment that is safer than the environments of the counties in which they are located.

If a parish or worshipping community has previously submitted a regathering plan under the previous guidelines, an updated/amended summary should be submitted at this time for review. Questions can always be directed to the Canon to the Ordinary and the members of the Diocesan Pandemic Taskforce.

FROM THE BISHOP

"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism..." –Ephesians 4:4-5

Dear Siblings in Christ,

Over the past 16 months of pandemic we have experienced, in a very tangible way, oneness in Christ. Together with our siblings across the world, we have adapted and adjusted to a new reality, new ways of being and doing church, and new means of being bearers of the Good News of Jesus Christ. We have discovered fresh expressions in worship and in serving our neighbors.

We continue to see glimmers of hope for the ending of this time of pandemic with the rise in vaccines, all the while being mindful of the rise of the Delta variant here in the State of Missouri. Members of the Diocese of Missouri have outpaced the general population in vaccination rates and continue to offer Christ-centered hospitality to those who are unvaccinated. We have shown tremendous love to our neighbors in countless, yet important ways. I commend you for your diligence in adapting to the changing realities this time of pandemic has brought. Our Baptismal calling to oneness has and continues to be lived out in so many ways across the Diocese as we look to Christ, our hope.

As we move into this new phase, with the easing and lifting of some restrictions within the Diocese of Missouri, I encourage you to continue to respect the dignity of every human being, and to be a loving presence to those within our wider communities. I am grateful for the work of the members of the Diocesan Pandemic Task Force, and for your willingness to keep each other safe during this time.

Know that you have been and will remain in my prayers as I ask for yours.

Yours in Christ,

The Rt. Rev. Deon K. Johnson, Bishop of Missouri



UPDATED GATHERING GUIDELINES

FOR COMMUNITIES WHERE VACCINATION RATES ARE AT OR ABOVE 80%

Given this encouraging data, effective July 15, 2021 in congregations where more than 80% of the current worshippers are fully vaccinated:

1. Masking and distancing during indoor public worship is optional for fully vaccinated individuals age 12 and over.
2. Congregational singing may resume, **provided the considerations in the Appendix at the end of this document are addressed by parish leadership.** We strongly urge these considerations be weighed carefully before making the decision to resume singing, and if congregational singing is allowed, to consider additional mitigation strategies where applicable.
3. Indoor coffee hour is permitted, provided steps are taken to limit the handling of food and drink to the minimum number of people necessary to serve it. (Examples: Have one person apportioning food onto clean plates, one person serving drinks for everyone, etc.)
4. Parishes must make **reasonable accommodations for families with children under age 12 or individuals who wish to remain masked and/or distanced**, and we encourage parishes to use imagination and flexibility to assist those individuals and families to fully participate in worship.
 - a. For instance, some parishes are already using items such as color-coded bracelets or lanyards that all worshipers choose upon entry to signal other worshipers their desires pertaining to distance and/or contact. (Example: An individual who chooses to wear a red bracelet is signaling they prefer 6 feet of distance from others. A yellow bracelet might mean "elbow bumps only" at the Peace. A green bracelet can mean "hugs are permissible." These sorts of aids allow individuals to state their personal needs without being physically segregated within the worship space.)
5. The cornerstone of Christian community is to preferentially respond to the needs of the marginalized. When the resolution of specific issues is unclear, we should err on the side of caution, **prioritizing the needs of the entire community over individual freedom.**
6. The Offices of the Bishop and individual task force members are happy to assist clergy and lay leadership in specific situations and circumstances not covered by this update.

FOR COMMUNITIES WHERE VACCINATION RATES ARE BELOW 80%

For congregations who do not yet meet the 80% vaccination threshold, **the June 1 guidelines remain in place**, and we strongly encourage efforts to get more people vaccinated.

Keep in mind that outdoor worship and coffee hour remain a safer option for all parishes, and congregations are encouraged to use these options when possible. Masks are not required for outdoor worship, but the CDC guidelines still **recommend that people who are not fully vaccinated are encouraged to wear a mask in crowded outdoor settings** or during activities that involve sustained close contact with other people who are not fully vaccinated or their vaccination status is unknown.

Additionally, the June 1 guidelines remain in place for situations involving groups of children or the care of children, and the handling and distribution of Communion. A link to the June 1 guidelines can be found here:

www.diocesemo.org/covid-19/



A NOTE ON THE COVID 19 DELTA VARIANT

In recent weeks, several dimensions of the Covid-19 pandemic have become increasingly clear.

1. The Delta variant which originated in India is rapidly emerging as an especially virulent form of the virus and the leading cause of local and regional surges. While the three current vaccines approved for use in the United States appear to offer broad protection from this variant (particularly severe illness), its eventual impact remains to be determined.
2. Guidance provided by governmental authorities at all levels, as well as the policies of businesses operating in the state, vary widely and often are in conflict. (For instance, as of July 4, CDC has still not updated their guidelines for communities of faith since February 19, and the last revision to their guidelines for large gatherings was May 6.)
3. Missouri continues to have a woefully low vaccination rate (45.3% as of July 4), and some counties within the geographical confines of our diocese have rates as low as 18%.

The Pandemic Task Force is monitoring these and other factors and when more information on the impact of the Delta variant is available (hopefully by late summer), we will create a more comprehensive document. We encourage any effort by our congregations to assist in improving the vaccination rate in our communities.



APPENDIX

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS AND POSSIBLE MITIGATION WITH REGARD TO SINGING.

General Considerations:

1. Singing remains the most problematic part of re-opening when unvaccinated people are present, because singing aerosolizes particles more than speaking, and aerosolized particles can easily travel 15 feet or more.
2. Because the aerosol science of choral singing is an extremely esoteric field of research and the COVID-19 virus is a relatively new infection, very few comprehensive studies have been performed on the viability of COVID-19 particles when aerosolized by human singing. The pool of resources congregations can draw upon for evidence-based guidance in this area is very small.
3. Because aerosols linger in the air for up to 3 hours, physical spaces where singing occurs can harbor the virus for longer periods of time. Closing off the area where singing has occurred for a prescribed period of time is the easiest way to handle indoor spaces where aerosolization has occurred.
4. Fully vaccinated groups of singers are the safest option for singing, and the [American Choral Directors Association](#) has dropped masking requirements for fully vaccinated groups of singers. A highly vaccinated group is still at some undefined risk, but no studies are available to quantitate that risk.
5. Outdoor singing is safer than indoor singing.
6. When feasible, improvements to building [airflow](#) and [air filtration](#) can further decrease risk.
7. Preliminary data suggests that, although breakthrough infections do occur in vaccinated people, they are uncommon and, at present, generally mild. Generally speaking, other unvaccinated people are the greatest risk to an unvaccinated person.

Possible Mitigation Strategies

Singing strategies already being employed or about to be deployed within the diocese by parishes that have worked on variances include:

1. Totally or near-totally fully vaccinated congregations with no further modifications;
2. Mask use during the singing of hymns, but no masking for other parts of the service;
3. Improving air exchange and airflow quality in preparation for more relaxed restrictions;
4. One choir where not everyone is fully vaccinated chose to remain masked as per American Choral Directors Association guidelines, even if congregational singing was allowed, because of their close proximity to one another.

Going forward, parishes are not limited to the above strategies, but these are provided as examples. Pandemic Task Force members and the Offices of the Bishop are available to help parish leadership in this rather muddy area. We urge parishes to communicate singing strategies to the [Canon to the Ordinary](#) so we can develop a “hivemind” approach to assist one another and centralize the information.