



THE EPISCOPAL
DIOCESE OF
MISSOURI

UPDATED GUIDANCE *for* GATHERINGS *in*
the EPISCOPAL DIOCESE *of* MISSOURI
EFFECTIVE JUNE 1, 2021



SUMMARY INTRODUCTION

These revised guidelines replace all previous protocols and reflect current policy of the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri effective June 1, 2021. 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.

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FROM THE BISHOP

Dear Siblings in Christ,

I continue to be exceptionally proud of the many ways in which communities of faith across the Diocese of Missouri have adapted to this time of pandemic. The innovation, creativity, and ingenuity that has been present in recasting the familiar in new and renewed ways has been simply amazing. I am so very proud of the ways you have continued to be the essential Body of Christ for a world in need.

We now come to a turning point in this time of pandemic with the advent of a vaccine and the continued decline in the transmission of COVID-19. We now enter into a new phase in our common life with hope toward a new normal. As followers of Jesus Christ, it is our care and calling to offer a generous-spirited hospitality to each other especially at this time.

“The Episcopal Church Welcomes You” stands as a welcome sign outside many of our communities, and it is, particularly at this time, an invitation for us as Episcopalian Christians to decide how to best welcome all equally. As a Diocesan household made up of vaccinated, partially vaccinated, and unvaccinated persons, as well as unvaccinated young people and those of all ages who are immunocompromised, we must practice a holy hospitality that points to the best of who we are as beloved children of God. As we move into this new phase, I encourage you to hold the love of God, the love of neighbor, and the love of self as our highest ideal so that we may move more fully into a sense of newfound freedom.

Know that you are in my prayers, as I ask for yours.

The Rt. Rev. Deon K. Johnson



FROM THE PANDEMIC TASKFORCE

As the number of COVID-19 cases continues to decline in our diocese, and the numbers of vaccinated people increase, we appear to be moving into the next phase of the pandemic. However, the proliferation of new variants of this virus and continued outbreaks requires us to be vigilant in protecting our congregations. Herd immunity (estimated at somewhere near an 80-90% vaccination standard) remains an elusive goal and may not be attainable. This virus is likely to remain active in the environment, although over time we may see more isolated outbreaks rather than wide-spread pandemic conditions. Vaccine hesitancy, misinformation and the recently slowing rate of vaccination continue to be a problem throughout Missouri and should be considered in developing regathering plans.

More hopefully, the three approved vaccines have demonstrated their safety and efficacy across the adult population, with the expectation that they also will in adolescents over the age of 12. Approval for the vaccination of children 2 years of age and older could be granted by the end of 2021. And, the CDC announcement on May 13 that masking and social distancing are no longer necessary for fully vaccinated individuals clearly reflects the progress we're making against COVID-19. Recent updates from the CDC give a great deal of leeway to pastoral discretion regarding small groups of vaccinated individuals. However, the CDC last updated their guidelines for large gatherings on May 7; they have not updated their guidelines for faith communities since February 19. This lag has made it challenging in interpreting the impact of the May 13 update as it relates to larger mixed groups of vaccinated and unvaccinated people.

We believe that God calls us to be faithful and responsible neighbors (Lk. 10:25-37), placing their needs even above our own. To be sure, we encourage every eligible person to get vaccinated but recognize that some cannot and others will not. Therefore, these guidelines especially need to protect the vulnerable among us. While respecting the choices of individuals, the diocese's vaccination policy is not and should not be grounded in the expression of personal liberty but rather in the shared needs and common good of the larger community of our neighbors.

Within this theological context of this social contract, the intent of the Task Force is to establish broad boundaries for parishes across the diocese, provide general direction, and encourage local leadership and flexibility. Toward that end, we have not attempted to address every circumstance that could arise. Rather, we hope that the principles and guidelines outlined in this document will provide a solid, evidenced-based foundation for decision making within your own community.

DIOCESAN PANDEMIC TASKFORCE MEMBERS:

The Rev. Maria L. Evans, M.D.,
Christ Episcopal Church, Rolla, MO

David Hirstius, D.O.,
Trinity-St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Hannibal, MO

Beth Mosher,
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The Rev. Marc D. Smith, Ph.D.,
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GENERAL PRINCIPLES

- Specific regathering decisions should be made by local clergy and lay leaders, with the Office of the Bishop available for consultation.
- Decisions should be evidenced-based and reflect the circumstances and needs of the local congregation and community.
- It is acceptable to distinguish between requirements for indoor, in-person worship and voluntary small group meetings.
- Flexibility and a willingness to modify requirements in response to changing circumstances and needs are essential for congregational leaders.
- 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.

GATHERING

- Masks are not required for indoor or outdoor worship and other gatherings of fully vaccinated people.
- If there is any question of the vaccination status of worshipers or attendees at indoor gatherings, masks and social distancing **are required**.
- The maximum allowed attendance for worship is the number of people who can be socially distanced at > 6 feet in the sanctuary.
- Cohort seating of family and friend units who are fully vaccinated is encouraged to expand capacity, where only the cohorts are required to maintain > 6 feet of social distancing.
- There is no maximum for outdoor gatherings.
- In small group gatherings (<10 for the purposes of this document) in which the group is comfortable in sharing vaccination status, are fully vaccinated, and mutually agree to adhere to CDC guidelines for fully vaccinated groups, they may meet without masks and distancing.

FACILITY HYGIENE AND WORSHIP MATERIALS

- Deep cleaning of public spaces is no longer necessary, but continued cleaning of high-touch surfaces (e.g. pews, communion rails, door handles, etc.) on a regular basis is recommended.
- Prayer Books, Hymnals, and reusable service bulletins are permitted, provided they are quarantined for 4 days following their use. Parishioners are encouraged to use complete worship bulletins or their personal Prayer Books and Hymnals for worship whenever possible.
- Maximizing fresh air ventilation, circulation, and exchange are strongly encouraged.



HEALTH SCREENING

- Temperature checks are no longer necessary, nor are screening questionnaires.
- Contact tracing using a sign-up sheet is strongly recommended as a mechanism to coordinate with local health authorities.
- To avoid disenfranchising members and visitors who may not have access to vaccines, **we strongly recommend against using vaccination status for participation in public worship.**
- However, requiring vaccination for participation in **voluntary** church gatherings other than worship is acceptable.
- Anonymous congregational surveys can be helpful in determining the vaccination status of the congregation, as well as the breadth of perspectives and concerns regarding gathering. If used, however, it is essential that absolute confidentiality is maintained and that the results are only reported in the aggregate.
- Because of the inequity in access to vaccines across Missouri, congregations are encouraged to pursue evidenced-based local strategies to increase vaccination rates, especially among marginalized populations.

IN-PERSON WORSHIP, COMMUNION, AND COFFEE HOUR

- Unless congregants and liturgical leaders (e.g. presider, preacher, lector, intercessor etc.) are vaccinated, all should remain masked throughout an indoor service unless speaking.
- When speaking during an indoor service, unmasked liturgical leaders should remain >6 feet from each other and >12 feet from worshipers.
- Congregants may engage in liturgical responses but not singing at indoor or outdoor services.
- Choral singing is permitted at indoor and outdoor services provided members of the choir are masked when singing and are >6 feet apart and >12 feet from congregants.
 - In-person rehearsals should be masked and limited to <30 minutes where vaccination status is unknown.
 - Cohort arrangement of fully vaccinated singers is allowed for both worship services and rehearsals.
- Wind instruments may be used at indoor and outdoor worship services under the same guidance provided for choral singing.
 - In addition to performers being masked (with a small slit for the mouthpiece), instrument bells (except recorders, flutes, and oboes) should be covered with MERV-13 material or a 3-layer surgical mask (e.g. GB/T32310).
 - Bread or wafers may be distributed for Communion. Neither wrapped hosts nor tongs are required, provided hands are cleansed before distribution.
- Both clergy and congregants should remain masked during the distribution of the host at indoor worship, with the preferred means of communion being both receiving it by slipping the host under the mask.
- Indoor “coffee hour” is strongly discouraged; however, outdoor gathering is permissible provided pre-packaged foods are offered and the touching of serving pieces is minimized.



SUNDAY AND VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL

- Indoor Sunday School for children < 12 years old should not be convened.
- Vacation Bible School for children < 12 years old is allowed outdoors, with participants generally maintaining reasonable social distance and consuming only pre-packaged food and drinks.

DIOCESAN REVIEW

- The clergy and congregational regathering committees are responsible for modifying expansion plans of in-person worship and/or meetings to the Offices of the Bishop for review.
- Requests for a variance from these guidelines must be submitted in writing to the Offices of the Bishop for review and document the specific rationale for the variance, as well as the safety precautions to be employed. (For example: some of our smaller congregations in the diocese may consist of 10-15 people of which >90% are vaccinated. It would be reasonable for those congregations to request a variance.)

Q & A: TASK FORCE RESPONSE TO LEADERSHIP QUESTIONS

- Members of the Task Force will regularly respond to your questions and offer our advice. However, these responses reflect personal perspective not diocesan policy.
- Clergy are encouraged to consult other sources to develop specific protocols for your parish.



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

The following questions are actual questions that have been asked of members of the Pandemic Task Force prior to issuance of the June 1 update for parishes in the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri, with the responses reflecting the new guidelines. Task force members are willingly available to work with leadership, lay and clergy, as new questions arise.

Q: *Is the altar rail open?*

A: The altar rail is not yet open. Depending on your building layout and traffic flow, you may want to either have people come forward in single file, or clergy could instead choose to take communion to worshipers in their pews.

Q: *Is there any scenario where we can do wine/chalice/communion cups?*

A: Under the current guidelines, only bread is being distributed.

Q: *Is bread allowed, or just wafers?*

A: Either bread or wafers may be used. Keep in mind that bread does tend to be handled more, and not all worshipers might feel as comfortable with bread as with wafers. Other parishes with a long tradition of using bread may welcome the return.

Q: *What provisions are there around the celebrant touching bread or wafers?*

A: The celebrant may touch the bread. If parishes had been presently using individually wrapped wafers, those are no longer required. Frequent hand sanitizing is recommended. The most recent data show that COVID is not as readily spread via surface contact, as we feared a year ago.

Q: *Are staff members required to be vaccinated for work? Are clergy allowed to require this? Are any of our churches requiring vaccination to attend?*

A: Parish staff members can be required to be vaccinated. However, keep in mind the following:

- Very few employers have done so
- Such a policy would have to include medical and religious exceptions
- Implementing any sort of requirement might be controversial in light of the reasons why some people choose not to be vaccinated; inquiries could be a violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

In short, asking someone if they are vaccinated is fine; they might choose not to answer. Asking why not is not. One can have a policy requiring vaccination but it is probably best to consult an attorney to develop it.

Q: *Can we require servers, acolytes, lectors, choir, etc. to be vaccinated?*

A: All who fill liturgical and/or musical ministries are strongly encouraged to be vaccinated if they are old enough to be vaccinated.



Q: *Are clergy who are vaccinated allowed to make pastoral visits to homes? To hospitals? Are there any limitations on this?*

A: Clergy may make pastoral visits. Keep in mind, however, that facilities are quite varied in their restrictions and regulations at this point. Clergy are still subject to the regulations and restrictions of health care facilities.

Q: *Is sharing of food/drink outdoors allowed?*

A: Yes. If you choose to have “coffee hour”, it is strongly recommended at this point in time that it be outdoors. For the purposes of this document, “coffee hour” is considered a voluntary activity. Masks are not necessary for fully vaccinated individuals. Single serving and/or single use items should be used and food should not be handled communally.

Q: *Do we need directional arrows in the aisles?*

A: If they are helpful in managing the flow of parishioners, the use of arrows or other directional aids is encouraged.

Q: *Is there a current limit on church occupancy?*

A: Occupancy is limited by the number of cohort seating groups who can maintain 6 feet of distance from other seating groups. Cohort Seating (allowing unrelated family groups who have shared their vaccination status with one another and choose to sit together) can greatly expand occupancy.

Q: *If a congregation is small, and approx. 90% of the congregation is vaccinated, if we remain masked, can we be a little more flexible with social distancing? My pews are only 7 feet long and that makes it hard!*

A: See the previous question and answer.

Q: *Is there a limit on meeting rooms that is different?*

A: No.

Q: *What are the guidelines for singing?*

- Congregational
- Ensemble/choir limits?
- Indoor vs. outdoor? Masks?

A: These questions are addressed in the current revision of the guidelines, under the “In-Person Worship and Communion” section.

Q: *Can we pass collection plates?*

A: Yes, provided the plates have been cleaned prior to the service, and are cleaned after the service and the bursars have finished tallying the offering following worship. Offering plates would be considered a high-touch surface.

Q: *Do we need registration lists for contact tracing?*

A: As long as your local and/or county health departments are performing contact tracing, sign-in sheets should still be employed.



Q: *Can baptisms be performed at the main act of worship, versus private baptisms?*

A: Baptism is intended to welcome the candidate into the Christian family and, as such, the rite should be shared communally whenever possible. Provided appropriate precautions are taken, baptisms can and should be celebrated within the context of corporate worship.

Q: *Can we do Sunday School?*

A: Indoor Sunday School is discouraged at this time for children under age 12. Hopefully by fall CDC will have further refined the guidelines for indoor gatherings of children. Vaccination is strongly encouraged for youth 12 and over.

Q: *Can children participate in outdoor activities?*

A: Outdoor activities such as Vacation Bible School are permitted, provided all participants are masked and distanced. Vaccination of staff is strongly recommended. It may also be helpful to consult CDC guidelines for youth and summer camps (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/summer-camps.html>) to create an operating plan, as there is a great deal of overlap to the scenario. Consideration in the plan should also be given to the following:

- Age level cohorts that remain together throughout the duration of the activity
- Frequent hand washing and/or sanitizing
- Supplies for each user with no sharing of supplies
- Procedure should a participant become ill or have a fever
- Cleaning/disinfecting of common use spaces
- Single-serving food items/snacks, and single-use utensils
- Families bring their own toys/ crayons for their children rather than having them supplied by the church.
- For children that are not vaccinated, please be aware that the children must stay masked and all adults around these children must be masked at all times, vaccinated or not.

Q: *What are the general parameters for opening nurseries?*

A: At this time the committee is discouraging opening nurseries because adherence to CDC guidelines for child care operations is a more detailed and complicated set of parameters than most congregations are capable of taking on at this point in the pandemic. An alternative might be to create "soft spaces" within your worship space where the youngest members of our congregations can be with their families, fully distanced from other seating groups, but with toys and other activities available. Any toys that do not belong to the child should be cleaned following use, and paper items such as coloring books should be quarantined for 4 days following use. It is preferable that families bring their own items for play.

Q: *Are there any guidelines around activities for kids who still can't be vaccinated?*

A: See the previous questions regarding Sunday School and outdoor activities.