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## Diocese of Oregon COVID-19 Guidelines for the Reopening of Parishes May 21, 2021

Almost as quickly as health authorities asked us to cease holding public worship in March 2020, the CDC has suddenly announced that it is appropriate for fully vaccinated people to gather unmasked indoors and outdoors. This is a lot for many of us to wrap our minds around...especially in Oregon, where restaurants and bars were just recently shut down due to exponentially increasing cases and hospitalizations.

There was also a church in Salem that made national news after dozens of members became infected, and several—including their head pastor and his wife—were hospitalized. None of us wants to be “that church,” and yet it is reasonable for parishioners to wonder when we will gather again for worship (if we’re not already) ... or when we can sing again ... or whether we must still wear masks and sit apart from others if we’re fully vaccinated. These concerns and the anxiety you may feel are valid, and these guidelines aim to answer some of those questions and ease some anxieties.

Some congregations, particularly small congregations, may voluntarily share their vaccination status, or some may have already, with each other. It is encouraged for parish leaders to inquire (without being invasive) the vaccination status of their congregation to better assess the next steps in reopening their parish for in-person worship. Congregations that are fully vaccinated may resume in-person worship unmasked. Congregations who may have some members vaccinated and some not must inform all parishioners that masks are required still for non-vaccinated individuals (including children over the age of 5).

### What we know:

- **COVID-19 spreads almost exclusively through the air**, in droplets and aerosols. This means that the best way to stop the spread of the virus (other than vaccination) is to prevent the build-up of [exhaled respiratory particles](#). This can be accomplished through optimized ventilation, as well as wearing tight-fitting masks covering the nose and mouth.
- **Outdoor transmission is extremely rare**. Evidence indicates that being outdoors in a fully ventilated area (no tent walls, etc.) [reduces the aerosol transmission of respiratory droplets](#), and is remarkably safe, even for unvaccinated individuals. So, the very safest place for churches to gather is outside.
- **Enhanced ventilation indoors is essential**. Opening windows and doors, or setting up a fan, to allow ventilation in a space will greatly reduce the transmission of respiratory droplets.
- **None of the known COVID-19 variants appear to spread well through contact with surfaces**. While this does mean that extra dedicated time does not need to be spent on cleaning and sanitizing everything in between services, regular practice of sanitation of



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commonly used surfaces (and any surface used for food, drinks, or used by children) is excellent hygienic practice.

- **Vaccinations help to protect everyone.** Although none of the available vaccines provide 100% protection against contracting and/or spreading COVID-19, they do greatly reduce both -- and if a rare breakthrough infection does occur, vaccines greatly reduce the chance of severe illness. Encouraging congregants to receive vaccinations is a sign of caring for one another and the greater community.
  - Consider taking a census of who has been vaccinated in your congregation and who has not, while being respectful of everyone's right to their own health decisions and circumstance.
  - Provide resources for unvaccinated individuals seeking to receive a vaccine locally and be ready to combat misconceptions.
  - If an individual is adamant about not receiving a vaccine, this may be a signal of a larger pastoral issue that may need to be addressed.

## Opening Parishes

According to the most recent CDC and [OHA guidelines](#) from the State of Oregon based in scientific data, returning to in-person worship services without face masks/coverings indoors is allowed for fully vaccinated individuals (an individual who has received both doses of a two-dose COVID-19 vaccine or one dose of a single-dose vaccine and at least 14 days have passed since the final dose).

Unvaccinated persons are to continue to wear masks and face coverings to protect themselves and other unvaccinated persons from the transmission of COVID-19.

- **In-person Worship services**
  - It is safe for fully vaccinated persons to gather in person for worship services without a mask and without keeping a 6-foot distance. This means that parishes need to no longer require alternating pews or space restrictions between households/individuals.
  - Parishes no longer need to require a sign-in form for services. However, some may continue to do so if they choose.
  - Clergy and lay leadership may ask the congregation and visitors to volunteer their vaccination status but requiring proof of vaccination to a) attend worship and/or b) unmask runs counter to the good faith in which we are called to behave as the church.
    - Parishioners and visitors may freely share their vaccination status (or some may show their vaccination cards), this should be noted by the clergy to better understand the overall vaccination status of the congregation.



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- If there is concern that parishioners and/or visitors are lying about their vaccination status, clergy should understand this as a larger pastoral and communal problem needing to be addressed.
- It is recommended to state at the beginning of a service or as folks are welcomed into the service that fully vaccinated persons can unmask at their discretion; unvaccinated persons, children, immuno-compromised individuals, or those with cold/flu like symptoms are to remain masked and maintain distance from others.
  - It is helpful to frame vaccination, mask wearing, etc. as a way of caring for one another and oneself.
- Sanitation of surfaces and objects:
  - Although it has been proven that COVID-19 does not easily transfer on surfaces, regular sanitation of highly trafficked and touched areas is great practice to continue. It is especially important to sanitize surfaces in preparation for serving food/drinks, and surfaces used by children.
  - It is not necessary to wipe down/sanitize Prayer Books, Hymnals, pens, etc. after each use. However, offering sanitation wipes to individuals who wish to sanitize before use is a great form of hospitality.
  - Please continue to encourage frequent handwashing and offering hand sanitizer; again, this is a fantastic practice we should continue. Proper hygiene is a form of caring for oneself and others.
  - Parishes should still offer masks for folks who are not vaccinated and/or those who are fully vaccinated and wish to continue wearing a mask.
- Singing:
  - It is safe for fully vaccinated persons to sing together, unmasked, nearby, indoors, or outdoors.
  - For unvaccinated persons who wish to sing (either in a chorus or individually) is it advised that they remain masked and maintain a distance from other unvaccinated individuals.
  - Children's choirs – see below.
- Eucharist:
  - Returning to offering Holy Eucharist in both forms is permissible if the clergy have confidence that everyone receiving has been vaccinated.
  - Drinking from the common cup, when offered in a silver chalice with wine, is safe. Silver is a natural anti-microbial metal; the alcohol content in the wine and using a clean purifier to wipe after each use, helps to reduce the risk. However, not all may be comfortable with the common cup. Please remind the congregation that receiving in one kind is considered receiving full Communion.
  - For unvaccinated persons, the main issue is proximity to other unvaccinated persons – perhaps offer to take the elements to the individual in their seat or offer another location than the railing for those to receive.
- Sharing the Peace with others is an essential part of gathering in-person for many folks. It is safe (and encouraged) to share the Peace of Christ with others during



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worship – please be respectful of the preference, comfort level, and limitations of others. Some may not be ready for or want a hug during the Peace.

- Please use your own discretion when offering the laying on of hands or other forms of healing prayers.

- **Indoor vs Outdoor vs Online/Hybrid Worship**

- While indoor worship is safe for vaccinated individuals without a mask, outdoor worship is the safest option for gathering as it allows for optimal air circulation and distancing between those who may not be vaccinated.
- According to CDC guidelines and OHA guidelines, individuals do not need to wear masks outdoors – this includes fully vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals. It is still good practice to maintain distance between unvaccinated individuals while outdoors.
- However, if congregations choose to gather indoors for worship, fully vaccinated persons do not need to distance or wear a mask.
- It is advisable to open windows and doors to allow for ventilation. For worship spaces without windows that open, congregations may consider the use of fans to allow for better air flow.
- Consider continuing an online worship service in one form or another – such as Morning Prayer or Evening Prayer. Or hosting bible studies or focus groups online can be a uniting place. We encourage you to view the use of online platforms as an additional resource for our life as a church rather than just a substitute for in-person worship.
  - Online worship and/or a hybrid approach to worship allows for folks who are uncomfortable meeting in person or are unvaccinated and wish to remain at home to participate in the life of the church.
  - We also encourage sharing resources and practices that work well for online/hybrid worship with other congregations in the diocese.

- **Children**

- Masks are strongly encouraged for adults when around children who are not yet vaccinated. This recommendation is to avoid confusing children as to why they are to remain masked, and others are not.
- Vaccinations are not yet approved for children under the age of 12.
- Children under the age of five (5) do not need to be masked in church.
- Continue to sanitize surfaces, toys, door handles, etc. commonly touched by children.
- Congregations may decide to hold off from regathering any children's choirs or allowing children to participate in the choir. However, if congregations do choose to



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regather, children should wear masks and maintain distance from others. Adults leading a children's choir should consider wearing a mask as well, as indicated above.

- **External Programs/Use of space**

- Parishes can open their space to outside vendors and groups with the understanding that it is the responsibility of the leader or contact person of that external group to monitor the vaccination status and mask wearing of individuals.
- Parishes should still have masks and hand sanitizer available in all common areas and continue to wipe down commonly used surfaces (again this is just a great practice we should continue).

These guidelines are robust but are in no way exhaustive – as folks gather again, more questions and concerns will rise. Please always first respond with grace and common sense.