

**Presbytery of Scioto Valley
COVID Pandemic Guidance
PSV Coordinating Team, 19 March 2021**

“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.” 1 Corinthians 1-3

This updated advice regarding worship and church operations during COVID is intended as a resource for Sessions as they considered reopening buildings and resuming church operations. The Presbytery leadership urges that even as we all desire to resume physical worship in our congregations, that love for the most vulnerable in our midst be our guide. We appreciate the combined caring and science-based approach that the Presbytery of Cincinnati, and its Executive Presbyter Lisa Allgood have taken. Much of the content of this document is taken from their communications. A presentation by Allgood and other documents are available through the Presbytery website (PSVonline.org).

So, what can I do with vaccinations...?!? (and other “why can’t we just throw open the sanctuary” questions)

Latest CDC recommendations for vaccinated individuals:

- Individuals who are fully vaccinated (at least two weeks passed last shot) may safely gather unmasked **but only with family and small groups who are in low-risk categories.**
- Fully vaccinated people must still wear masks, socially distance, and avoid larger gatherings in a public setting.

- A vaccination is not a magic cape
 - Even 95% efficacy means that statistically 19 out of 20 people are effectively covered by the vaccine but 1 in 20 is not
 - Vaccines are less effective against variants
 - Being vaccinated means it’s unlikely YOU will become seriously ill, but there is still a chance you can catch a variant and/or be infectious (be a virus carrier)
- CDC recommends that masks and distancing remain in effect until the average number of new cases in the US drops below 10,000/day – the last time that happened was March 2020. We are currently (March 2021) at 70,000 new cases per day.
- Herd immunity is defined as 70-90% of the entire population vaccinated (not just your congregation)
 - 20% of the population is below 18 and therefore not eligible for vaccination yet (current vaccines are for 16 and above)
 - Statistically that means even if all who are eligible are vaccinated, >25% is not covered until vaccines are approved for 4 and above
 - Herd immunity won’t really come until 2022

So, what does this mean for my opening the sanctuary?

Basically, the previous restrictions should remain in place. **Vaccinations do not allow you to throw risk-limiting behavior out the window, even if everyone is vaccinated – not yet.**

- Session is responsible for the use and conditions of use for the building, and for decisions around that.
 - Because of that Session is also then responsible to monitor and enforce any conditions of use of the building you establish. This is NOT the responsibility of the pastor.
 - Whatever conditions of use you establish must be enforced both for the congregation, committees, and outside groups.
- Create a decision tree that takes into consideration the COVID status, vulnerable populations, the building itself, and vulnerability (if any) of your pastor and worship staff, as well as the ability of the church to conduct virtual worship.
- Pick a CREDIBLE data source on which to base decisions.
 - In Ohio, use the Ohio government color-coded system – it's made up of 7 medically-relevant and medical system utilization data points that are objective and unbiased. Presbytery STRONGLY urges churches to meet virtually if your county is red or purple.
<https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/covid-19/dashboards/other-resources/public-health-advisory-system?&id=1616090021858>
 - CDC also has a county-by-county search tool and is very credible, objective, and unbiased.
- Pick ONE data source and stick to that – you will drive yourself crazy if you try to reconcile data from multiple sources, as reports are compiled at different times.
- Presbytery STRONGLY urges churches to stay virtual right now or consider outdoor worship as the weather gets nicer.
- Presbytery STRONGLY urges churches that elect to go back to in-person worship to do the following:
 - Masks are mandatory and to be worn at all times.
 - Session members should plan to either provide masks for people who have signed up in advance (see below) and don't have one, or turn them away
 - It is still recommended that no singing occur as evidence indicates singing spreads more virus than other activities.
 - Nothing that blows air around during worship – if your air conditioning or heater blows air over the congregation, pre-AC or -heat the room, turn the blower off during the service (encourage coats and sweaters if you must). Open windows and door to provide fresh air ventilation is great!
 - Special filters, foggers, UV etc., only cleans the air until that air blows over someone who is infected – then the air is dirty and infectious – and remember, 40% never show symptoms but are still infectious, and a person who will go on to develop symptoms can be infectious and asymptomatic for up to 8 days
 - More than 6 feet physical distancing between family groups – estimate in advance how many people your sanctuary can realistically hold with at least 6 feet distance
 - Limit anything that is passed around or touched by multiple people.
 - Leave collection plates in the back for people to put offerings in
 - Leave communion elements in the back for them to pick up in advance or have them bring their own
 - Have a sign-up sheet before the service so you can estimate how many people want to come (and cut off the sign up when you have reached your calculated maximum).

- If people try to come in who have not signed up in advance, Session members need to be at the door to tell them no
- Sign-up sheets are also useful in case you need to do contact tracing should there be an exposure.
 - If there is an exposure, contact the local Board of Health immediately and shut the building and in-person meeting down for 2 weeks
- Exclude use of bathrooms or any other part of the building (or limit bathrooms to one person at a time and provide alcohol wipes for them to clean surfaces they have touched)

What about individuals facing a high risk of infection or in vulnerable groups?

We **strongly** urge congregations to continue to make online worship available to all members with particular attention to vulnerable groups and to discourage them from attending in person worship at this time. If you congregation cannot offer online worship, we urge you to connect vulnerable individuals with a congregation that does.

What about employees and volunteers at the church?

You are obligated to provide necessary protective equipment to church employees if you require them to work in situations in which contact with COVID-19 is reasonably possible.

- Any church employee who can work from home, and desires to do so, should be permitted to do so.
- Any employees of the church working on church premises **must** be masked whenever in a public area of the church building.
- You are not permitted to release any health-related information regarding your pastor or other employees of the church, including information regarding COVID-19 infections, without a HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) compliant written release from that individual. However, for all employees, the following rules should be implemented:
 - If he or she is diagnosed with COVID-19, the individual must immediately notify his or her supervisor. The individual should be required to be quarantined for a minimum of 14 days and stay quarantined for a minimum of 72 hours after he or she becomes completely symptom free including, but not limited to, no fever for 72 hours. The individual must also provide either his or her supervisor with the names of any co-workers, church members or visitors with whom you have been in close proximity (6 feet) in the previous 14 days, so that those individuals may self-quarantine for an appropriate time.
 - If he or she has been in contact with anyone who is diagnosed with COVID-19, he or she must self-quarantine for 14 days, and must also immediately notify his or her supervisor. He or she should not be permitted to come into the building during this 14-day period.
 - If she or he experiences any symptoms associated with COVID-19 (such as fever, chills, cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, new loss of smell or taste, diarrhea, or vomiting) while in the building, then he or she must immediately leave the office and notify his or her supervisor at the church.
 - If he or she has traveled outside of the United States or to an area with high rates of infection in the U.S. If you live with, or have been in close contact with, anyone who has traveled outside of the United States, he or she must self-quarantine for 14 days upon return. She or he should not be permitted to come into the office during this 14-day period.
- Session does not have the authority to require a pastor to conduct worship, funeral services, marriages, or other activities if the minister does not believe such activities are safe. Any attempt by a Session to require a minister to do so can result in corrective action by the Presbytery. A minister

may not be removed from office or the terms of his or her call changed without the concurrence of the Presbytery.

- Child and youth protection policies and sexual misconduct policies must be strictly enforced if a congregation returns to in-person worship. The challenges of staffing and enforcement created by COVID-19 are not a defense to harm caused by failure to follow such policies. Nor are requirements to perform background checks on childcare workers in any way excused or reduced by the pandemic.
- Any individuals providing childcare, supervision of children or at-risk populations must be strictly screened for infection.

Stay safe – we are not through this yet!