



## May 18, 2021 Pandemic FAQ from Executive Presbyter Erin Cox-Holmes and Stated Clerk Michael Wilson

### What Is the Current Advisory from The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)?

The new advisory from the CDC is titled “Interim Public Health Recommendations for Fully Vaccinated People” and may be found here: [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/fully-vaccinated-guidance.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/fully-vaccinated-guidance.html)

The key provisions are that fully vaccinated people can:

- Resume activities without wearing masks or physically distancing, except where required by federal, state, local, tribal, or territorial laws, rules, and regulations, including local business and workplace guidance.
- Resume domestic travel and refrain from testing before or after travel or self-quarantine after travel.
- Refrain from testing before leaving the United States for international travel (unless required by the destination) and refrain from self-quarantine after arriving back in the United States.
- Refrain from testing following a known exposure, if asymptomatic, with some exceptions for specific settings.
- Refrain from quarantine following a known exposure if asymptomatic.
- Refrain from routine screening testing if feasible.

An infographic showing what is safe and less safe for fully vaccinated people and unvaccinated people may be found here: [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/pdfs/choosingSaferAct.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/pdfs/choosingSaferAct.pdf) CDC Guidance for non-vaccinated people remains the same: wear face coverings and practice social distancing.

We continue to advise adopting an approach that is mindful of the severity of Covid 19 infections in your county. To gather data on the metrics in our counties, we utilize <https://covidactnow.org> a 501c3 in partnership with Georgetown University Center for Global Health Science and Security, Stanford University Clinical Excellence Research Center, and Harvard Global Health Institute, which mines its data from official local and state agencies, such as the County Health Departments.

We also acknowledge that this FAQ is pertinent to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. We have one congregation in Harford Co Maryland and consult separately with that session.

### What is the Current Face Mask Order from The Pennsylvania Governor and The Pennsylvania Department of Health?

Pennsylvania’s Guidance automatically updated to match the CDC in accordance with this provision: [www.health.pa.gov/Documents/First%20Amendment%20to%20Updated%20Order%20of%20the%20Secretary%20Requiring%20Universal%20Face%20Coverings%20Clean%2031621.pdf](http://www.health.pa.gov/Documents/First%20Amendment%20to%20Updated%20Order%20of%20the%20Secretary%20Requiring%20Universal%20Face%20Coverings%20Clean%2031621.pdf)

**In Pennsylvania, the face covering and social distancing order for those who are unvaccinated (including children above the age of two who are not presently vaccine eligible) remains in effect until the percent of the adult population who are fully vaccinated reaches the 70% threshold.**

To reiterate: The Universal Face Covering Order is *still in effect* for those who are not vaccinated. This order may be found here:

[www.health.pa.gov/topics/Documents/Diseases%20and%20Conditions/Updated%20Order%20of%20the%20Secretary%20Requiring%20Universal%20Face%20Coverings.pdf](http://www.health.pa.gov/topics/Documents/Diseases%20and%20Conditions/Updated%20Order%20of%20the%20Secretary%20Requiring%20Universal%20Face%20Coverings.pdf)

### **Does the Face Mask Order for Those Who Are Not Vaccinated Apply to Churches? We Thought We Were Exempt from This Order?**

On May 3, 2021, the Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Health issued an Updated FAQ Requiring the Universal Face Coverings Order (for those who are not vaccinated). This FAQ contains this Question and Answer:

***Do I have to wear a mask at a house of worship such as a church, synagogue or mosque?*** *Yes, individuals must wear a face covering inside any public place as well as outdoors when they cannot maintain sustained physical distance from those who are not members of their household.* This FAQ may be found here:

[www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/coronavirus/Pages/Guidance/Universal-Masking-FAQ.aspx](http://www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/coronavirus/Pages/Guidance/Universal-Masking-FAQ.aspx)

To reiterate: the order requiring the wearing of face coverings at a house of worship is *still in effect* for those who are not vaccinated.

### **What About Other Mitigation Orders Such as Capacity Restrictions and Social Distancing?**

On May 4, 2021 the Governor of Pennsylvania announced that COVID mitigation orders will be lifted, beginning on Monday, May 31, 2021. This means that beginning June 1, 2021 Sessions are permitted to eliminate capacity restrictions for gatherings. Sessions are not obligated to do so.

- View the portal for Pennsylvania guidelines here: [www.pa.gov/guides/responding-to-covid-19/](http://www.pa.gov/guides/responding-to-covid-19/).
- Maryland mitigation restrictions can be accessed here: <https://governor.maryland.gov/recovery/>

### **What Is the Advice of The Presbytery Regarding Vaccination?**

The Leader Team and COM encourage church leaders – including pastors and officers – to receive a vaccine as you are medically able to do. We also urge sessions to encourage congregation members to be vaccinated as an act of care for themselves and their neighbors. Some of our congregations have developed programs to assist members in registering for vaccines and transportation to vaccination appointments. We believe that having as many of us vaccinated as possible helps our communities and our congregations. We recognize that there may be good reasons for someone not getting a vaccine, including medical conditions or religious objections. Nevertheless, we do encourage all those who are able to be vaccinated. This is a way to protect not just yourself but also those around you, and particularly those who are unable to receive the vaccine.

### **May a Congregation Require that Employees be Vaccinated?**

The question of whether a session may require church employees to be vaccinated is complicated and competing legal opinions have been expressed. There is an emerging consensus that businesses *might* be able to require employees to be vaccinated at some point, but that it might be ill-advised to make this a requirement. Any requirement for vaccination must contain provisions for those who are medically unable to be vaccinated, and those who decline to be vaccinated due to a sincerely held religious conviction. Obtaining this information from an employee rapidly begins to tread into HIPAA and Religious Freedom protections. The situation for church employment is even more complex due to laws related to the separation of church and state. The legal landscape is untested because parameters for employment issues are often developed through litigation and case law, an area most employers prefer to avoid.

Speaking as the Executive Presbyter and Stated Clerk, but not as attorneys, we believe it is reasonable to ask employees if they have been vaccinated, in order to learn whether face masks may be removed in the work environment. We do not believe it is wise to ask employees to explain the medical or religious reasons for declining to be vaccinated, or to force an answer if an employee declines to provide the requested information.

Legal research is being conducted and ecclesiastical opinions are in development regarding whether vaccination may be a requirement for new hires, including issuing a call to a pastor. We will update this advisory when there is more information.

### **May a Session Provide Incentives for Employees to be Vaccinated?**

According to the Presbytery attorney, a church employer may provide reasonable incentives for an employee to be vaccinated. Examples would be offering 1 or 2 paid days off for each vaccine (in addition to any sick days needed to recover from side effects.) Another example would be a gift card, in an amount not to exceed \$100.

### **May A Session Require Proof of Vaccination to Permit the Removal of Face Masks on Their Premises?**

At present, the legal consensus is that it would not be wise to require attendees at church events to show vaccination cards in order to be permitted to remove face masks. This is a topic that is hotly debated in all aspects of public life at present. We must wait for new norms and guidance as we move forward.

### **What Are the Options for Face Mask Policies for Worship and Other Events?**

As a reminder, the Pennsylvania face mask order is still in effect for those who are not vaccinated. This means that legally your congregation must follow this order. You may not adopt a “Face Mask Optional for Everybody” Policy, until the masking order is lifted in Pennsylvania. Once again, the present ruling is that the order will be lifted when the adult vaccination rate in Pennsylvania reaches 70%.

We believe there are two reasonable options:

- **Face Masks Optional for Vaccinated People; Face Masks Required for Non-Vaccinated People:** In this option, those who are not vaccinated, including children over the age of two, must continue to wear face masks. Those who are fully vaccinated – meaning two weeks after their last vaccine shot – may remove face masks when in attendance at worship and other church events. The advantage to this option is that it gives more freedom and a sense of normalcy to those who are vaccinated. The disadvantage is that it creates a sharp divide between those who may remove face masks, and those who may not. Another downside is that it relies upon the “honor system” that those who remove their face masks are fully vaccinated. If those who are not vaccinated decide to remove their face masks “anyhow,” they could put people who are immunocompromised at risk.
- **Everyone Continues to Wear Face Masks in Worship and Other Large Gatherings Until the Pennsylvania Face Coverings Order Is Lifted:** The advantage to this option, is that everyone is “treated the same” in worship. The unvaccinated are not singled out, including kids and those who are unable to be vaccinated. It preserves worship as a safe space for those who are immunocompromised. Those with immune issues have found their freedom curtailed by the sudden lifting of face mask orders, and the fear that some who remove face masks may not be vaccinated. The disadvantage to a face mask required policy is that it limits those who are fully vaccinated from resuming “normal” life without a face mask.

### What Are Churches in The Presbytery Doing About Worship?

Most of our churches have now returned to some form of in-person worship. Not all congregations have done so. By our best count, all but around five of our congregations are meeting in-person, either outdoors or indoors. About thirty-seven have at least one service that is offered indoors in-person or are making plans to resume indoor worship in the near future. Many continue to offer some form of live streaming, pre-recording or conference call to serve those unable or unwilling to attend in person. The hybrid church is here to stay. There is as much variety as there are congregations in our midst Some are worshipping indoors with windows open. Some have upgraded HEPA filtering. We have a congregation that is bringing a piano outside after indoor worship so that they can sing one song together! Sessions should recognize that their congregations will have people with a wide variety of risk tolerance, health needs, vaccination status and other factors. All efforts for reasonable accommodations should be made to be as inclusive as possible.

### What About Singing?

The CDC Infographic on what is safe for those who are vaccinated and those who are not vaccinated makes it clear that the CDC believes someone who is fully vaccinated may sing unmasked in a church choir (and therefore at a church service.) It is not regarded as safe for those who are not vaccinated to sing in church, although singing softly behind a face mask is safer than singing without a face mask.

For choirs, we can think of several scenarios:

- Limiting the choir/singers to an ensemble of those who are vaccinated is one option, and the best option in terms of safety. It is safe for a fully vaccinated ensemble to remove their face masks, according to the CDC.
- Another option would be to permit vaccinated choir members/singers to remove face masks, while unvaccinated members would need to remain masked. This brings all the benefits and downsides previously discussed in the Mask Policy for Church attendance section.
- Another option would be to permit the choir/singers to sing, with face masks for everyone.
- Another option is to continue to forego singing groups or choirs until the mask order is lifted, and all may sing unmasked. For those who are not vaccinated, it remains true that it is safer to sing outdoors than indoors.

### What About Fellowship Hours and Congregational Meals?

If there is a mix of people who are vaccinated and those who are not vaccinated, it might be best to wait a while longer before resuming fellowship activities involving eating or drinking. In general, it is safer to eat outdoors than indoors.

### Should We Keep Sanitizing and Deep Cleaning?

We continue to recommend reasonable cleaning and sanitizing practices. Since the CDC has confirmed that the COVID-19 virus spreads largely as an airborne disease, many groups are discontinuing taking temperatures and deep cleaning procedures between gatherings. The updated CDC guidance for cleaning and disinfecting facilities may be found here:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>

### Is There Still an Advantage to Worshiping Outdoors?

Yes! Not only does worship outdoors connect worshipers to God's great creation, but it also remains true that COVID-19 spreads much more easily indoors than outdoors. Offering options for outdoor worship is an act of care for those who are immunocompromised, or otherwise at risk for indoor gatherings.

### Your Question Here

What else? Many questions are best addressed by individual consultation. Do not hesitate to be in touch with us for any other questions or needed counsel. Please know that all of our leaders and congregations are in the daily prayers of presbytery leadership.

On behalf of the Presbytery of Donegal Leader Team and Connecting Our Ministry Commission,



**Rev. Dr. Erin Cox-Holmes**

Executive Presbyter

[erincoxholmes@gmail.com](mailto:erincoxholmes@gmail.com)



**Rev. Dr. Michael Wilson**

Stated Clerk

[michael@donegalpby.org](mailto:michael@donegalpby.org)