



Illinois South Conference COVID-19 Response UPDATE #20, May 17, 2021

New CDC Guidelines on Masks

A sharp decline in Covid-19 cases across the country has allowed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to lift the mask requirement for anyone who's vaccinated. The new policy as of May 13, 2021, is that fully vaccinated individuals (two or more weeks after the last vaccine) don't need to wear a mask outside or inside, except in certain settings. While those who have not yet been vaccinated do still need to wear masks.

Exactly which settings are not fully delineated, but the guidance indicates fully vaccinated people should continue to wear a mask when visiting health care facilities, when flying or taking public transit, and when in close group settings. If a business or organization requires a mask, that rule still applies, too. Churches are close group settings at certain times of the week, too. Here's what we do know: Illinois will update mask guidelines to match the new CDC guidelines. Illinois has entered the bridge phase of the recovery plan. If all the Covid-19 metrics continue to fall, Illinois will enter Phase 5 on June 11, and return to being fully open with no restrictions.

In these next few weeks, it's going to be a bit tricky. Governing boards will need to make decisions based on what is good and right for all members of their congregations. Here are some things to consider:

- While many members are fully vaccinated, others are not. Vaccinations for ages 12 to 15 have just begun. Children under 12 are not currently eligible for vaccination, and some adults are medically unable to receive the vaccine. Consider how your Sunday School and youth programming will reflect the particular safety needs of our children and youth who are still vulnerable.
- You can ask congregants if they are vaccinated; you cannot ask for visual or physical proof (that would break healthcare privacy laws). But even if you can ask, this doesn't mean you should. Since none of us want to be in the position of policing who should or should not wear a mask, it might be better to simply say your church still strongly encourages masks, especially those who are not vaccinated.

- Just as there are persons who are excited about the idea of no masks, singing, and sitting more closely, there might be just as many persons who feel more comfortable being masked, refraining from singing, and being socially distanced. Consider how you can accommodate both wishes and needs in your sanctuaries and your buildings for worship services, meetings, and church-sponsored activities.
- Regardless of the decisions and changes, you make in the next few weeks, please remember people will make choices that are good and right for themselves and their families. There will be many people who are not ready to fully return to in-person worship, meetings, and activities. Please continue to offer virtual options to include these members as well.
- As we prepare for the expected return to full-occupancy, in-person worship in mid-June, we encourage you to make space for all people to gather and worship in a way in which they feel most comfortably able to do so.

***Hang in there-- we're almost on the other side of a global pandemic!
You have met so many challenges during the past year. We know you can meet these new realities with the grace and patience this moment requires. Continue to rely on the wisdom of God to make the best decisions that reflect the love, kindness, care, and compassion of the One we serve. Let us continue to be the Church Christ is calling us to be.***

Together in Christ's ministry with you,
Dr. Jill Baker, Conference Moderator
Rev. Christy Eckert, Conference Vice-Moderator
Mr. Dwight Asselmeier, Conference Treasurer
Rev. Ivan Horn, Conference Secretary
Rev. Shana Johnson, IL South Conference Minister