

## **RE: UPDATED CHURCH GUIDELINES (8/7/21)**

### **RECOMMENDATION BY:**

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Medical Director, ZMCHD

COVID-19 and its impact on our community continues to change. As the data evolves and the situation changes, we must change with it in order to provide as safe an environment as possible. At this time, the changes are not for the better. Therefore, using current data, I have updated my church recommendations.

As I noted before, these guidelines are my creation. We do not receive specific church recommendations from ODH nor the CDC, yet church is a vital part of the lives of so many in our community. I am continually receiving questions about safe church behaviors. So, I have written what I feel are reasonable, safe, and fall within the most recent COVID recommendations from the CDC.

What do we know?

- The level of community transmission of COVID-19 in Muskingum County is now rated by the CDC as “Substantial”. This is the third highest out of 4 levels of spread of the infection.
- Covid cases are surging, nationwide, statewide, and countywide. Our case numbers are increasing at a rapid rate and hospitalizations in our region of Ohio are increasing at the highest rates in months.
- Delta is much more infectious and causes much more serious symptoms than the original COVID-19 virus.
- Delta now accounts for over 80% of all COVID-19 cases.
- Delta remains sensitive to all 3 of the currently used vaccines. So, if you are fully vaccinated, you are very well protected. But none of the vaccines are 100% effective.
- Over 98% of all COVID-19 hospitalized patients are not fully vaccinated.
- If you are fully vaccinated and you become infected, your symptoms will almost always be much milder.
- However, data is now telling us that even if you are fully vaccinated, and your symptoms are mild, you are likely to spread this virus to susceptible persons.
- Masks work. Delta infected patients spread a lot more virus particles through respiratory droplets than any prior COVID virus. Masks are a very good first barrier to this spread. Masks protect the wearer as well as those around you.
- Social distancing works. It appears that even 3-foot social distancing is significantly effective.

- Only 40% of our county is fully immunized, meaning that the majority of our residents are susceptible to infection.

The following recommendations are offered as guidelines for the church. In Ohio, public health leaders cannot issue mandates. However, private entities, businesses, churches, etc. CAN issue COVID mandates. So, what follows are recommendations (not mandates) that I perceive to be “best practices” that can help to keep the church as safe as possible for all who attend; and they are based on the best current data as regards the spread of the COVID virus.

- 1) Masks should be required for all in attendance, regardless of vaccination status. And the mask is to be on for the entire service. If there is a medical reason that a church member cannot wear a mask, I recommend that they participate virtually.
- 2) Signage should be visible and obvious stating that masks are required.
- 3) Masks should be readily available at all entrances to the church.
- 4) There should be signage that reminds all who enter that if they have been ill or exposed to a COVID positive person in the last two weeks, they should not enter.
- 5) The pastor and any other speakers can remove their mask for preaching/speaking, provided that they are socially distanced from anyone in front of them.
- 6) All in attendance should be asked to sit with their own family groups and to carefully socially distance throughout the church, for the service.
- 7) Congregational singing, responsive reading, etc. should be done with masks on.
- 8) The adult vocal choir can continue to meet for rehearsals and sing in church. However, singing can be problematic for spreading the virus. Therefore:
  - a) All participating members should be fully vaccinated, with no exceptions. They should arrive with masks on but can remove them for rehearsal, since everyone present is fully vaccinated.
  - b) They should sit 3 feet apart and the choir director should be at least 6 feet from the closest singer.
  - c) For singing in church, the choir should be physically distanced from the congregation.
  - d) They should remove their masks only for singing and then the masks should be put back on.
- 9) Bell choir can meet for rehearsal and performing in church.
  - a) All participating members should be fully vaccinated, with no exceptions.
  - b) All participants should wear masks for the entire rehearsal.
  - c) If performing in church, all masks should remain on at all times.

- 10) Taking names and contact information is not necessary. However, I recommend that a picture be taken in the event that contact tracing becomes necessary.
- 11) Single use bulletins can be used for services.
- 12) The Sacrament of Communion should utilize individually wrapped or protected elements.
- 13) For Children's church services, if resumed, I recommend
  - a) All children over age 2 should be masked, if at all possible.
  - b) All adults that tend to the children in any capacity should be fully vaccinated. (None of the children are vaccinated, yet.)
  - c) All adults that tend to the children in any capacity should remained masked at all times.
- 14) I would avoid activities that promote close personal contact, such as "Passing of the Peace"
- 15) The offering plate should be stationary, not passed person to person.
- 16) The sanctuary and restrooms should be sanitized after each service.
- 17) Other church activities such as prayer groups, staff meetings, committee, and board meetings, etc., should consider the following:
  - a) Masking is required for all in attendance regardless of vaccination status.
  - b) Anyone that is not fully vaccinated should consider participating virtually.
  - c) Seating should be socially distanced.

If our community transitions into the "High Community Transmission" category, these recommendations may change.

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