

REGATHERING SUGGESTIONS (Revised June 4, 2021)

CPC of the Presbytery of Florida

Over the past 17 months, congregations and sessions in the Presbytery of Florida (PoF) have dealt with ever-changing Covid-19 statistics and guidelines. As the infection and death figures decrease and vaccination rates increase, federal recommendations and state requirements have eased. The Coordinating and Planning Commission (CPC) asks that you join us in sending thanks to our Lord for being with us through these very difficult months and requesting his continued presence and guidance in making decisions regarding worship and church activities.

Many congregations are resuming worship in some form. The PoF Regathering Suggestions as revised in this document are suggestions only, based on the most current scientific information available and USA Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines. Although decisions will be made by individual sessions following the sharing of information, prayer, and requests for God's guidance, there will be variations by congregational situations. Within each congregation there will invariably be a range of risk tolerance, health needs, vaccination status, and willingness to participate in live group worship and activities. Reasonable, highly-inclusive accommodations are encouraged. Respect, cooperation, patience, and acceptance of differing opinions have been and will continue to be the marks of healthy congregations.

These presbytery Regathering Suggestions have been revised to reference several documents which may be of assistance in making Covid-related decisions. Following a short review of each reference, the CPC presents suggestions summarizing CDC recommendations for several congregational situations. As Covid-19 science evolves, all references discussed should be checked regularly for current statistics and updated recommendations. Over time, we expect these presbytery-specific suggestions to be further revised, as well.

REFERENCES

We encourage each congregation and session to periodically review each of the following references.

1. Interim Public Health Recommendations for Fully Vaccinated People (May 13, 2021)
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/fully-vaccinated-guidance.html>
2. Choosing Safer Activities (May 13, 2021)
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/pdfs/choosingSaferAct.pdf>
3. U.S. Covid Risk and Vaccine Tracker
<https://covidactnow.org>
4. Considerations for Communities of Faith (February 19, 2021)
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/faith-based.html>
5. Guidance for Organizing Large Events and Gatherings (May 20, 2021)
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/large-events/considerations-for-events-gatherings.html>

The May 13, 2021 CDC recommendations (#1 in the reference list above) indicate that fully vaccinated people no longer need to wear a mask or physically distance in any setting. The guiding principles in that document are:

Indoor and outdoor activities pose minimal risk to fully vaccinated people.

Fully vaccinated people have a reduced risk of transmitting SARS-Cov-2 to unvaccinated people.

Fully vaccinated people should still get tested if experiencing COVID-19 symptoms.

Fully vaccinated people should not visit private or public settings if they have tested positive for COVID-19 in the prior 10 days or are experiencing COVID-19 symptoms.

Fully vaccinated people should continue to follow any applicable federal, state, local, tribal, or territorial laws, rules, and regulations.

Within the CDC recommendations is “Choosing Safer Activities” (#2), a one-page list of example activities and potential risks to both fully vaccinated and unvaccinated people outdoors, indoors, and in a range of numbers. One activity particularly pertinent to PoF congregations is singing. An indoor chorus is listed as “safest” for fully-vaccinated and unmasked participants but “least safe” for unvaccinated but masked folks. Both groups should be considered in making a decision for your congregation.

Across the presbytery communities there are undoubtedly variations in vaccination levels and infection rates. A very useful information document is #3 on the reference list, the U.S. Covid Risk and Vaccine Tracker. It provides county-by-county data compiled by 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.

Item four (#4) in the reference list is the CDC Considerations for Communities of Faith, last revised in February of this year. It reflects earlier CDC recommendations which are more conservative than the May document. However, while recent CDC recommendations permit more freedom for fully-vaccinated individuals, the considerations in this document provide a standard overview of good practices for congregations.

The last document (#5) is the CDC Guidance for Organizing Large Events and Gatherings. It includes contact tracing activities. Most of this document remains unchanged with the exception of cleaning and disinfection information.

SAMPLE CONGREGATIONAL SITUATIONS

Worship

A number of PoF congregations have continued or begun line-streamed and/or recorded worship. We expect this will continue to some extent across the presbytery and will be particularly helpful in staying in contact with homebound individuals or those unwilling to attend worship in person. Several churches have specified sections of their sanctuary for those preferring to be distanced from others, which may encourage some congregants to resume in-person worship.

Masks

Guidelines indicate that fully-vaccinated individuals may be unmasked in both large and small groups. Unvaccinated people are to wear masks as prevention for themselves and others. This is not suggested as a mandate in churches, but is strongly advised. For the time being, children are included in those who will be unvaccinated and must mask. However, children under the age of two (2) are exempt in current CDC masking recommendations.

Singing

The CDC research has confirmed that Covid-19 virus is an airborne disease. Outdoor singing is safer for unmasked as well as masked, but indoor choir participation appears to be safe for vaccinated and unmasked but “least safe” for others. CDC guidelines indicate risk for fully-vaccinated and unmasked choristers is minimal. Singing is not advised for those who are unvaccinated, even when masked. Each session should make a decision regarding congregational singing based on the vaccination and immunity rates within their own congregation.

Fellowship and Meals

Eating at an indoor restaurant is indicated as safest for vaccinated and unmasked people, but not recommended for others. Each session must consider the vaccination rates and risk tolerance of their own congregation when deciding about communion (individually packaged or communal plates), reception drinks and food, and congregate meals. The CDC does not share any evidence suggesting that handling food or eating is directly associated with spreading the virus. However, serving at a common area such as a buffet line and sharing serving utensils is more likely to spread any disease. As each of those situations is likely to include both vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals, and masks must be removed in order to partake, these will be difficult decisions. Solutions might include these as “box lunch” service, with unvaccinated in a separate part of a well-ventilated room, or as outdoor activities.

Sanitizing

Covid-19 is primarily an airborne virus. High quality air circulation is essential for facilities where church members gather. Deep cleaning of rooms between gatherings has been largely decreased, although routine cleaning must continue. If water sources have been unused for some time, they should be determined safe for use. High-contact surfaces (faucets, toilets, doors, doorknobs, countertops, sinks, light switches, diaper changing tables) should be cleaned and fully disinfected daily when in use. When paper handouts are used, each individual should be asked to dispose of their own papers.

Presbytery staff and volunteers continue to hold each of you in prayer for creative and meaningful ways to return to and continue the worship, business, and mission of this presbytery and each congregation.