

COVID-19 Update from Lisa Allgood, Executive Presbyter

Our trusted immunocytochemist and executive presbyter from Cincinnati Presbytery offers this update on her advice to congregations:

I've been getting a lot of questions as Sessions struggle with how to "come back". So, I'm reiterating current (June 2021) guidance from CDC:

- Fully vaccinated people (more than 2 weeks since the last dose of vaccine) can stay unmasked for most public gatherings, especially outdoors.
- If a business or church requires masks, that overrides the CDC guidance. Any entity may require masks, even when CDC/state requirements do not.
- Masks must be worn for all people – vaccinated or not – on public transportation and in transportation hubs (train and bus stations, airport concourses). Medical facilities are also continuing to require masks at all times.
- However – fully vaccinated people who are immunocompromised in any way – on cancer or transplant treatment, steroid treatment, have an autoimmune disease or other immunocompromising condition – may be less protected by the vaccine and should still be masked at all times.
- **IMPORTANTLY – the CDC guidelines for unvaccinated people have not changed.** They are still required to wear masks and stay at least six feet away from others in most circumstances, but they can go outside with members of their household or gather with family and friends who are fully vaccinated outdoors without masks. Within the church, unvaccinated people (including unvaccinated children) should still be asked to wear masks while in indoors worship.

Variants:

- The Delta variant is now predominant in every state. This variant is 60% more highly infectious and more highly virulent (causing disease) than any other variant to date. The vaccines are generally effective, but at a lower rate. Importantly, this variant has been shown to cause more significant disease in the young.
- This variant is also showing breakthrough infection for fully vaccinated people at a slightly higher rate, especially for those who have only had one shot.
- COVID rates have doubled in the US over the past two weeks due to the Delta variant (from 9.9% to 20.9%). It was at 2.7% of cases across the US in May. At that rate we will soon (within weeks) become like the UK, which is now reporting 99% of all cases are due to the Delta variant.
- This variant is particularly concerning for young unvaccinated, which causes them to get significantly sicker significantly more quickly as well as making it more likely they will require hospitalization.

Vaccines:

- These vaccines ARE approved by the FDA and ARE safe and effective. They are also our best weapon, both short and long term, against the pandemic.
- According to CDC, at this point, just over 45% of adults in the country are fully vaccinated and 58.7% have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.
- Full vaccination covers the Delta variant at about 88% of efficacy; that falls to 33% with only one dose.
- Vaccines continue to be in development for younger children (6 months-11 years), but are not yet ready for FDA review. It's possible they could be approved as early as this coming fall.

What does this mean for church?

- Decisions remain up to Session, but Session remains responsible for enforcing any decision.
- Fellowship can be done safely – but strongly consider limiting it to a brief coffee and cookies, outside if at all possible. One church is doing socially distanced "bring your own" picnics outside – a great way to fellowship and a great way to show your neighbors the community is gathering!
- Singing for vaccinated people without masks is OK, but unvaccinated people should be masked – and if they are part of a choir, probably the whole choir should stay masked. Choirs are still discouraged if a significant number are unvaccinated, and should still be minimal and distanced as much as possible.
- To AC or not to AC? I know it's getting hot. If you can't open windows, do the best you can... if unvaccinated people are masked the entire time, AC should be OK. If you know you have unvaccinated people who aren't wearing masks, you're putting them and others at risk.

We are not done with COVID – not by a long shot. The epidemiologic community is watching to see if the Delta variant evolves further, and if a variant of concern is beginning to emerge that is evading the current vaccines.

Stay safe and be blessed - Lisa