

## ECMN COVID-19 Plan

*Learning to negotiate risk with love*

### Background

When the pandemic began over a year ago, we were all thrown into this crisis abruptly. We had very little information about the novel COVID-19 virus, how it was transmitted, or possible treatments. We were all forced to take decisive action, and that action looked the same for all of us--stay at home, stay safe, and adapt to a new online environment.

Over a year later, we have significant data about COVID-19 and excellent vaccines that are widely available in the United States. While this disease is still dangerous, and not everyone in our communities is yet eligible for vaccination, we are now at a time when our communities can begin moving into a new stage of living with this virus.

During the summer of 2020, we talked about the phases of living with COVID-19 as seasons. Last spring, we were in a blizzard, locked down together. But now, the COVID blizzard has passed, the plows have come through, and the snow is beginning to melt. As we move towards spring, with new growth and possibility, it no longer makes sense for us all to adopt the same course of action in every place. Our contexts, membership and community demographics, buildings, congregational size, etc. are so vastly different. As all those variables intersect with vaccination rates and variation in local mandates and regulations, a one-size-fits-all approach is no longer sustainable, helpful, or even possible.

Because of all this, **the decision about when to re-open for in person worship now belongs entirely to the leadership of local faith communities**, in compliance with local and state laws. We will continue to provide recommendations and best practices, which can be adapted to fit local contexts.

### Theological Grounding

While it is no longer possible or necessary for every community to move forward in the same way or according to the same schedule, it is important as we plan for re-opening to remember who, and whose, we are. As disciples of Jesus, it is important to ground all of our local discernment in questions such as what love looks like, what it means to be fully inclusive, and what it means to seek good for the other, particularly those who are marginalized in any way. The answers to those questions will look different in different places, but those are key questions that guide us as Christians.

We urge you to be particularly mindful about practices in intergenerational spaces that include families with small children who are not yet eligible to get vaccinated, where safety measures like masking and distancing should remain in place. We should strive to avoid creating a two-tier system, wherein some members of our community feel safe participating in services and activities and others do not.

Finally, the best way to serve your community is to get vaccinated. Increasing the number of vaccinated people is critical for moving fully out of the pandemic, and part of how we love God's children is by doing so.

## Recommendations

***ECMN will no longer be mandating our COVID protocols***

What follows are best practice *recommendations* based on information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Minnesota Department of Health, and other academic research institutions. These recommendations are not hard and fast rules. You may find that some or all of these apply to your community. You may find that some of these do not make sense in your context or do not serve your community well. We will continue to update and expand on these recommendations as the public health reality and our understanding continue to evolve.

**Your faith community still is required by the Minnesota Department of Health to have a COVID-19 business plan. We ask that you continue to submit your plans to the Building Use Task Force.** You can submit those plans by [uploading them here](#).

## Building Management and Communication Recommendations

- Continue to track who is coming into the building for contact tracing purposes.
- Review your ventilation and change your system's filters as needed.
- Post signage reminding folks of the rules, so expectations are clear.
- Communicate your expectations and plans to your community.
- Allow outside groups back into your buildings, provided they have a COVID safety plan and clear communication protocols in case of a positive COVID test.
- Health screenings at the door are no longer necessary.
- One-way and specific entry/exit routing are no longer necessary.

## Service and Programming Recommendations

- Meet indoors when the case rate is BELOW 25 cases/100,000 (this can be found at [covidactnow.org](https://covidactnow.org)) as this is a better measure of disease spread in the community now that people are being vaccinated.
- Maintain masking for multigenerational and youth activities (this prevents the exclusion of families with children not yet eligible to be vaccinated).
- Resume in-person pastoral care visits with appropriate planning and protocols that fit your community.
- Resume worship either indoors or outdoors, including funerals, weddings, baptisms, and other worship services.
- Resume ministry groups indoors, ensuring leaders understand and follow the church's safety policies.
- Maintain masking and distancing rules for youth activities that include unvaccinated individuals, and hold these activities outdoors as much as possible.
- Continue to use of bulletins instead of prayer books and hymnals, unless the hymnals/prayer books are cleaned once per week.
- You may fill your font with Holy Water and asperge the congregation as needed during a Baptism.

## Recommendations for OUTDOOR Activities or Worship

- Capacity:
  - None
- Masking:
  - Multigenerational community: masks while moving around
  - May be removed when sitting
- Distance:
  - Sit in household groups 6 feet apart
- Singing:
  - If choir or vocalist(s) are all vaccinated: without masks
  - If unvaccinated, use singer masks as needed, found online from many sellers.
  - Maintain appropriate distance
  - Congregational singing if congregation is masked
- Eucharist:
  - Bread (including wafers or homemade bread) distributed to the congregation.
  - Continue to refrain from using the common cup.
- Social hour/food:
  - Yes (plan for precautions and food safety)
  - Maintain appropriate distance
- Building Use:
  - Make bathrooms available
  - Have a plan for inclement weather that allows for safely gathering indoors if needed.

## Recommendations for INDOOR Activities and Worship

- Capacity:
  - Follow Governor's recommendation: 250 until July 1, unless MN achieves a 70% vaccination rate before July 1; reception tables should have no more than 10 people until July 1 or MN is at 70% vaccination rate.
- Masking:
  - Multi-generational community: masks at all times
- Distance:
  - Sit in household groups 6 feet apart
- Singing:
  - Choir vaccinated: Masked and no number limit
  - Choir unvaccinated: Masked and limited to 4 with distance
  - Use singer masks
  - Maintain appropriate distance
  - No congregational singing
- Eucharist:
  - Bread (including wafers or homemade bread) distributed to the congregation.
  - Continue to refrain from common cup.
- Social hour/food:
  - No food or drink and mingling only if multigenerational gathering, should be masked and distanced
  - If all are vaccinated, food/drink are ok to serve

## **Additional Resources and Links**

- Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) – [Stay Safe MN site](#)
- MDH – [COVID Safe Business Rules](#) for places of Worship
- MDH – [Posters and Signs](#) for printing
- Center for Disease Control (CDC) – [Singing Guidance](#) for houses of worship
- CDC – [Vaccine Guidance](#)
- CDC – [Children/Youth Summer Camp recommendations](#)