



## Metro NY District 2021 COVID Updated Information

*...we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. (1 Cor 8:1, NRSV)*

This week the CDC released new gathering guidelines that seem, on the surface, to lift all indoor gathering guidance. We have said throughout this pandemic, "Metro District will follow the science, and comply with all local, state, and CDC guidelines." Because our churches followed this advice, we reported no deaths among our clergy, and the incidents of death in our local churches were far lower than the average NYC numbers. We are writing today to encourage you to stay the course, and keep up this great work, even as you begin to return to more in-person gatherings. And because our indoor worship gatherings are unlike general indoor settings covered by the CDC guidance, we want to share with you some ideas we are hoping you will adopt in your local church.

We have said frequently this past year that our churches are not "required" to do something" just because it is allowed. Paul advised us that "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" and that they should "take care that your liberty does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." (1 Cor. 8:1, 9). The minimum required is not necessarily the standard our churches should adopt, especially as the outside world looks to us to be leaders in compassion, empathy, and love for our neighbors.

It's our expectation that many of our in-person gatherings will be similar to riding a city bus or subway – there will be a mix of vaccinated and not vaccinated, there will be limited ventilation indoors, and most churches have not spent the money to install or upgrade HVAC systems to be COVID compliant. The CDC guidelines seem to target indoor activities where it's known the vaccinated status of those attending and assumes the un-vaccinated would not risk attending. We do not believe that to be the case. And more than anything we are hoping to keep our church pastors and leaders out of the "enforcement" business and about the Kingdom building business.

In the greater Metro NY area (our District) the vaccinated population is estimated to be around 33% - it's slightly higher in New York state at 41% but both fall well below the target all are hoping for. There is still a significant hesitation by some communities in our cities to be vaccinated. This poses a serious challenge for the local church and pastors wanting to bring our people back together.

Add to this that the medically fragile, pregnant women, the immunocompromised, and children under 12 (those yet to be vaccinated) and the risks only increase. These members of our congregations deserve the highest care and protection of our local church families, and all deserve to witness how the Church follows sensible precautions in caring for one another. The

vulnerable among us should not have to bear the burden of those unwilling to be vaccinated or follow the safest CDC guidelines, erring on the side of caution.

**If you are looking to adapt your practices to be less restrictive, some of our most trusted sources currently recommend following a “two out of three” approach: wearing masks and practicing social distancing indoors, and choosing either masks or distancing as a strategy when gathering outdoors.**

To that end, we are offering some “DO’s” and “DON’T’s” that we hope will inform your decisions over the coming weeks and months. This pandemic is not behind us, and no one we know wants to repeat what we experienced in 2020. We hope you’ll agree that as we grow in scientific knowledge, combined with our best orthodoxy and orthopraxy, we can avoid the pain and suffering of the past. Let the churches of the Metro NY District lead well!

Rev. Dr. Samuel Vassel, District Superintendent

Rev. Bruce K. Barnard, Director of Operations and Finance

Rev. Dr. Jeff Barker, Director of Clergy and Congregational Life

Rev. Althea Taylor, Director of Tom Nees Center for Compassion, Justice, and Immigration

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#### **DO:**

- Continue to follow COVID-safe practices until background levels of virus are very low.
- Plan gathering and building re-opening carefully and thoughtfully.
- Adopt a “two out of three” approach: masks, social distancing, gathering outdoors.
- Follow state and local guidelines which are not affected by the new CDC advice.
- Provide an example of good health practices, particularly for children who have not been vaccinated.
- Gather in ways that do not exclude or put at risk unvaccinated members of the community, such as children or medically vulnerable individuals.
- Continue to offer digital viewing of your gatherings so that those uncomfortable being in-person can participate in the weekly worship of your local church.

#### **DON’T:**

- Decide the pandemic is over.
  - Rush into re-opening, disregarding medical and commonsense advice.
  - Discard safe worship practices.
  - Ignore state or local health regulations or requirements.
  - Act in ways that require unvaccinated or vulnerable members to choose between being safe and participating in the community.
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