



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

VIRGINIA CONFERENCE
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Updates to in-person worship in the Virginia Conference

Hello Virginia Annual Conference:

Psalms 30 declares that “weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes in the morning” (v. 5, ESV). When we closed our church doors in March of 2020, it began a period that felt like a long night of weeping. During this current pandemic, many lives were touched by the loss of loved ones and by life-threatening battles with a deadly new virus. Children and families have struggled with the effects of closed schools. Front-line workers in health care and other service industries endured long hours with extraordinary measures while others lost their jobs. All of us can acknowledge some physical, psychological, or emotional and spiritual wounds from our collective experience.

We are beginning to see, in falling case numbers and rising vaccination rates, the promise of a new day.

Last year I created the Back to In-Person Worship Work Group to help us employ the best practices in fighting the pandemic as we returned to worship. Later, I created an additional Mission and Ministry Work Group to extend that work to other forms of ministry in the life of the church. The dedicated clergy and lay people who have served on these groups have done exceptional work, committing many hours on a weekly basis to helping us develop policies using the best expertise available.

However, the pandemic is not over and the resources created by these groups are still important for our churches.

As of May 1, I am discontinuing the two work groups, (In-Person Worship and Mission & Ministry), with gratefulness for all that they have done. In their place, I am establishing a new Post-COVID Re-Entry Group (PRG) that will help us move confidently into this new day. The new group will continue to offer resources to keep us safe during the remaining months of the pandemic but it will also offer new resources that focus on doing ministry in the changed environment we now face. The Rev. Seungsoo ‘R.J.’ Jun, our new Associate Director of Serving Ministries, is convening this new group which will include members of the previous work groups.

Also, I am asking local churches to develop their own PRG teams to develop plans for worship and ministry. These groups will take the place of the Healthy Church Teams (HCTs), which have done so much great and important work on the local church level. **By July 1, all major decision-making for mitigation methods will revert to local churches.**

Here’s what you can expect to see over the next two months as we prepare for this shift:

- 1. continued resources and updates from the new conference PRG team based on the latest CDC and Virginia Department of Health guidance,**
- 2. a revised and greatly-reduced successor to the Technical Assistance Manual (TAM),**
- 3. weekly webinars beginning May 13 that will feature national church leaders to discuss ministry in the post-pandemic world,**
- 4. support for the development of local church PRGs.**

For more information, please read the [news release](#) covering the information from our April 26 Progress Report Webinar or view the [recording of that event](#).

In the near term I am also announcing some changes to the current TAM provisions:

1. fully vaccinated persons may now engage in congregational singing indoors for up to five (5) minutes total,
2. groups of up to four (4) persons who have been fully vaccinated can lead congregational singing and/or offer an additional three (3) minutes of special music indoors if properly masked and distanced,
3. fully vaccinated persons may now be unmasked in outdoor worship settings, except while singing, when they are properly distanced, and
4. there is now no time limit on singing in outdoor settings, though persons must be masked.

Churches should not require proof of vaccination as we rely on an honor system and we should strive to make worship hospitable and inclusive for all persons, regardless of their vaccination status. Details of these changes are reflected in [the current TAM](#).

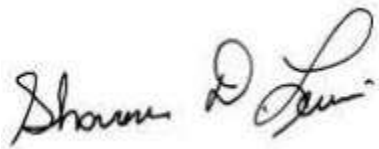
I pray that we will continue to see a decline in COVID-19 cases. I have now received my second vaccine dose and am on my way to being fully vaccinated. I hope you will see it as part of your commitment to the health of yourself, your family, and others to seek out vaccination as well.

If we should see a resurgence of the virus in the months ahead, we may have to revert to some of the measures we instituted through this last year, such as the full TAM, but the good news is that we have learned so much and we know what to do.

These changes are not an invitation to remove all restrictions. **We will still need to be vigilant for months to come and I am asking that local churches submit any new plans to their district superintendents for review after July 1.** But it is time to make this shift and to rely on the wisdom that all of our local churches have developed through this crisis.

Thank you for the trust you have placed in me and in the work groups as we have led through an unprecedented time. I trust that God will continue to bless the Virginia Annual Conference.

Peace and Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sharma D. Lewis". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bishop Sharma D. Lewis