



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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An update on singing during COVID-19

Dear Virginia Annual Conference:

You may be asking: When we will sing again?

The Bishop's Work Group on Return to In-Person Worship has been steadily and frequently reviewing the latest studies and guidance around singing and wind instruments. As we have learned more, we have offered opportunities to move slowly back toward the rich musical life we associate with the full praise of God. Here's a summary of where we are:

- Congregational singing is allowed **in outdoor settings** with well-fitting masks and distancing. Because the duration of singing is a risk factor, singing should be limited to 5 minutes total for a worship service—enough for about two hymns. Singing *sotto voce* (in a quiet voice) adds another level of mitigation.
- While choirs are not yet allowed, **in an outdoor setting** up to 4 singers wearing masks are allowed with proper social distancing—at least 6 feet from each other (more is ideal) and 25 feet from the congregation. Persons in household groups may stand closer to each other (but not to congregation). These singers may be used to lead the 5 minute congregational singing and/or an additional 3 minutes of music in the worship service.
- One soloist (vocalist) may remove their mask **while singing outdoors** for up to 3 minutes when distanced at least 25 feet from the nearest participant.
- Up to 4 wind instruments (with masks especially designed for wind instruments) are allowed (**outdoors only**) at least 6 feet from each other (more is ideal) and 25 feet from the congregation. Persons in household groups may stand closer to each other (but not to congregation). These instruments (up to 4) may be used to lead the 5 minute congregational singing and/or an additional 3 minutes of music in the worship service.
- **No singing is allowed in indoor settings for in-person worship.** But as Rev. Leigh Anne Taylor has outlined in some [remarks on singing](#), this may be the season of alternative explorations—silence, dance, strings and percussion, sign language, and even lament for having to forego the gift of singing.
- Recording and live-streaming sessions that involve 10 or fewer people are not specifically covered by the Technical Assistance Manual (TAM), but the work group has some [recommended guidance on the website](#) for worship leaders to consider as they develop their own plans.

Why has the Virginia Annual Conference taken this approach when it is clear that some churches have much different standards on singing?

Dr. George Moxley, a member of the Work Group and a physician and rheumatologist at VCU, recently did a [review of the literature on singing](#). He notes that “everyone is fed up with the consequences of this pandemic, but the aim of current measures is to make rational decisions to mitigate risk until it is over. The current measures reflect judgments of risk versus benefit based on admittedly incomplete data.”

Even with falling case rates and increased vaccinations, the pandemic is not over. Viral variants have emerged that are more virulent and infectious than the original COVID-19. Some of these variants seem to attack even those with prior infections or who have been vaccinated. And given that many of our congregations and choirs are people who are vulnerable because of age or medical conditions, it is important for us to stay the course with our mitigation methods, moving cautiously toward the end line.

Vaccination is a very promising development and we are learning a lot more about what fully vaccinated folks can do as new guidance emerges. As Deborah Fuller, a professor of microbiology at the University of Washington, wrote in a [recent article in The Conversation](#), COVID-19 vaccines don't prevent infection, but they reduce the risk of getting seriously ill "to almost zero."

Even so, we don't yet know the risk of a vaccinated person transmitting the virus to unvaccinated people. The CDC continues to recommend that fully vaccinated persons wear masks, social distance, and avoid medium and large-sized gatherings. As Fuller says, "Because of the emergence of new variants, vaccinated people still have the potential to shed and spread the coronavirus to other people, vaccinated or otherwise."

Dr. Moxley describes his evaluation process as being guided by three principles: taking all evidence together in a summary and not just anecdotes, recognizing that not all evidence is of the same quality, and factoring in our values and preferences. His summary of current studies on singing can be found on the Work Group web page.

One day soon we will sing a new song to the Lord. We will sing it together and, one day, sing it loudly. While we wait and yearn for that day, we give thanks to God for all the gifts of this season in the life of the Church and pray for the wisdom and courage for the living of these days.

Peace and Blessings,

Bishop Sharma D. Lewis and the Return to In-Person Worship Work Group