

Post-COVID Re-entry Group Update

January 27, 2022

Greetings to the local churches and PRG teams, who are doing their best to keep our members and the community safe! We are grateful for your dedication and discernment in stopping the spread of the highly contagious Omicron variant. In the past week, we have seen the numbers of COVID reports from our local churches decline. We believe this is a result of the strong mitigation practices established by each local church's PRG teams. We ask each church to keep up the great work and continue to be vigilant.

Please remember to keep all the families who are battling with COVID in your prayers. Added prayers are needed for the health care workers and for our communities to make the best decisions for the welfare of everyone, so let's continue to keep each other in our prayers.

The PRG team wanted to clarify the reason why we ask churches to report COVID cases to the district superintendent and to the Rev. Dr. Steve Summer, Assistant to the Bishop and Director of Connectional Ministries. If a clergy person is exposed or tests positive, it is imperative that the district superintendent be notified of how the church is responding to the absence of the chief worship leader. However, the report shared with the Assistant to the Bishop is limited to an event when a guest or a member attends a worship service or church function and subsequently tests positive for the virus. In those events, we would like to have data on how our mitigation practices are working in stopping the spread of COVID. Therefore, it is helpful for us to understand the mitigation practices the church has established and how its responses change after the report. We would also like to see if there were any transmissions that occurred during the event, so we can have data on assessing the overall effectiveness of our practices.

We rely on your leadership and reporting to make sure that all 1,300 churches of the Virginia United Methodist Conference are a safe sanctuary for God's people to

worship and share the love of God with one another and the world. Please continue to join us in this effort. We also hope that the following resources will help your church's PRG team's decisions in ensuring the safety of all people.

In Christ,
PRG Team

Do children still need to wear a mask at church?

On January 15, 2022, the Governor of Virginia issued [Executive Order Two \(2022\)](#) which allows parents of school-aged children to elect for their child "not to be subject to any mask mandate in effect at the child's school or educational program." While pandemic restrictions continue to be relaxed regionally and nationally, and we give thanks for these hopeful signs, we know the pandemic is not over. Your PRG Team is charged with regularly reviewing the appropriateness of the layered mitigation practices for your congregation, especially during times when we experience a resurgence of COVID-19 or its variants.

Masks are still appropriate in indoor settings, regardless of vaccination status, when physical distancing cannot be maintained and/or in congregant settings where persons from multiple households are gathered. Universal and correct use of face masks is part of our collective, layered mitigation practices which have proven effective for reducing and mitigating the transmission of COVID-19. The Center for Disease Control continues to recommend that [everyone 2 years of age or older who is not fully vaccinated](#) should wear a mask over their nose and mouth while in indoor public places.

We recommend that if your congregation currently requires masks to be worn by those attending worship and other church-sponsored events, parents who request that their school-age children be exempt from mask-wearing may submit their request in writing to the PRG. Each PRG may then review the request(s) and make decisions that are consistent with the health and welfare of the children and their church community,

making every effort to “love our neighbor” and “do no harm.” The “B.R.A.I.N.” decision-making model ([previously provided in the MAP](#)) is offered to local PRGs to assist you in making important and challenging decisions for your church moving forward. Gathering input from the congregation may also be helpful to the PRG in their decision-making process.

*contributed by Reba Miller, R.N & Attorney, PRG member

All masks are not equal

New guidance on respirators or facemasks from the CDC as of Jan. 14 can be found at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/types-of-masks.html>

Some masks are more protective than others and this is particularly important with the more transmissible Omicron variant. Vaccination remains the best and most reliable way to prevent the spread of all variants of COVID 19.

Masks provide an extra layer of protection for everyone in indoor settings, regardless of vaccination status. Social distancing, limited exposure time, and increased ventilation are also important. Well-fitting N95 (95% particle filtration) masks that meet the U.S. NIOSH standards and KN95 which meet the international standard provide the best protection. There are other paper masks that do so as well, such as the KF94. These masks are electrostatically charged to attract aerosol particles to the paper. Straps that go around the head rather than just the ears tend to provide a better and more comfortable fit. The KN95 masks are often counterfeited, so take care in purchasing them. See <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/npptl/usernotices/AdditionalTips.html> for tips on avoiding counterfeits.

Surgical masks tend to allow leakage around the sides and below the eyes and typically do not have multiple layers. Although not as effective, cloth masks should have at least three layers of fabric and fit snugly around the nose and mouth including a metal strip to provide a close fit above the nose.

Can N95 Masks be reused?

You can clean and reuse your KN95 or N95 mask using a brown paper bag. Observing a three-day cycling process before reuse allows for any aerosols on the surface of the mask to dry out/evaporate and any active virus to dissipate. The bag serves to keep the mask covered and clean between uses over the three days.

https://www.wusa9.com/article/news/verify/verify-95-n95-masks-brown-paper-bag/530-c8281e88-8e51-4e71-89ab-1bde783df7d8?fbclid=IwAR2TVX4G-9foRiJc3q6_6SWH5Gpi0fJ3WToHB5h7DfsmVnEEWFUA80epABw

*Contributed by Mr. Andrew Kissell, Environmental/Sanitary Engineer, PRG team

Outside groups using church buildings

It is the responsibility of the local church's PRG to provide guidelines for any outside groups using the church facility. Remember to use the M.A.P., and remember that constant communication is the key.

REMINDER - What to do when the church discovers a positive case

When a member who attended a service informs the pastor of their positive COVID-19 diagnosis, what are the steps the pastor/ church should take?

Step 1. Notify all members attending the service/ event using the template below. Continue to keep close contact with the member who tested positive. Remember to be pastoral as your church cooperates with the effort of contact tracing.

Step 2. Close off the section of the church where the member sat who attended the service/ event and conduct deep cleaning in that area.

Step 3. Inform the [District Superintendent](#), the [Assistant to the Bishop/Director of Connectional Ministries](#) and the local health department of the positive case, and provide regular updates on the infection and mitigation measures completed to the district.

Step 4. Evaluate to determine if this was an isolated case or if multiple cases have developed in consultation with the local health department.

If multiple cases have developed, review the M.A.P. and ask the P.R.G. team to determine ways to improve mitigations to prevent future outbreaks. Make assessment according to the following criteria:

1. Was the mitigation planned out well?
2. Was the mitigation plan properly implemented in accordance with the MAP?
3. Even though it was planned well and properly implemented, did we determine that we still had an exposure?

Continue to monitor for any secondary cases. Consult with the District Superintendent and health department in the event of an outbreak.

[Church Letterhead]

[Date]

[Contact Information]

Subject: Potential COVID-19 Exposure and Precautions at _____ UMC

Dear Friends:

I am writing to you and the congregation, who attended ____ am worship service on _____ [insert date] to discuss the protocol for handling a potential exposure to COVID-19, also known as the Coronavirus. Please pray for our broader church community during this stressful time.

A worshiper who attended the _____ a.m. service at _____ on [insert month, date, and year] has tested positive for COVID-19. Any individuals who were in close contact, as defined by the Virginia Department of Health as within 6 feet (with or without mask) for 15 minutes or longer during a 24-hour period, have been notified directly. Fully vaccinated individuals are not required to quarantine, but we ask you to remain vigilant. **If you have not been directly notified you are not medically impacted by this diagnosis.**

Our church leadership and PRG team members are closely monitoring this situation. We have thoroughly cleaned the areas of possible exposure and reviewed (or reviewed and updated) our health mitigation plans. I will continue to keep you informed of developments. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Please remain vigilant and continue to keep our church and this community in your prayers.

In Christ, Rev. _____,
Senior Pastor
_____ UMC

Enclosure

cc: [\[Insert District Superintendent's Name\]](#), District Superintendent

[_____ District] (Via Email)

[Steve Summers](#), Assistant to the Bishop