



Northern Illinois District
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

**COVID-19 Reopen Task Force
CDC’s “Fully Vaccinated” Report and Illinois’ Phase Recovery Plan
Reopen Supplement for May 2021**

May God’s Word Guide Us

As the nation’s vaccination rate continues to increase and subsequent positivity rates decline, Illinois has entered into the Bridge Phase of its recovery plan. Likewise, the CDC has issued a report, noting that those who are fully vaccinated may resume pre-pandemic activities (with limitations as set by local government and health agencies laws and guidelines), notably no longer requiring the use of masks or physical distancing with others who are fully vaccinated.

While this is good news as our society moves toward life similar to what life was like prior to the pandemic, this transition period of society opening up presents challenges and complexities for our congregations. Pastors and congregational leaders currently are wading through the variety of *choices* that need to be made in light of the “new freedoms” acknowledged by our government agencies for the fully vaccinated. This is being done by these leaders, all the while realizing that those same government agencies are only issuing *guidelines* for houses of worship and **not** specific mandated step-by-step instructions on how to utilize recent data in such a way that best cares for members who have and who have not been vaccinated.

Our Reopen Task Force seeks to come alongside the congregations of the LCMS Northern Illinois District to assist them in making decisions of how they will continue to connect God’s people to Word and Sacrament at their given places of worship and maintain a Christ-centered/Christ-like witness to their surrounding communities. We would highly encourage that this update be read by not only pastors and lay leaders, but by the general members of each congregation. As we seek to be a helping resource with this report, we turn to God’s Word for wisdom and guidance.

While the Scriptures do not directly address steps that a congregation should take when coming out of pandemic-related mitigation measures nor the timing of when those new practices should be set in place, the Lord does give us wisdom from His Word related to our attitude toward others when making such



Northern Illinois District

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

decisions which helps us look to be Christ-focused in how we treat one another as the Body of Christ.

Consider the following passages from the Apostle Paul:

In concern for fellow followers of Jesus who may be weak in their faith, Paul writes in I Corinthians “Now concerning food offered to idols, we know that ‘all of us possess knowledge.’ This knowledge puffs up, but love builds up...Therefore if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.” [I Cor. 8:1-13]

Again Paul writes in Romans, “Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother...So let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.” [Romans 8:13 - 19]

Our Lord directs us through Paul in Galatians 5 “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you bite and devour one another watch out that you are not consumed by one another.” [Galatians 5:13-15]

Paul also encourages us in Romans “Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good...if possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” [Romans 12:9, 18]

As your pastors and congregational leaders make “best practice” decisions based on the shifting and sometimes seemingly conflicted statements of government agencies on how we live as a fully-vaccinated/not vaccinated society, this Task Force entreats you to do your best to hold to the following:

- Lift up every decision on best practices and everyone making those decisions in fervent prayer, asking our Lord to guide us by His Spirit, that His will be done, and that we maintain a spirit of unity of peace among us for the sake of the Gospel.
- Exercise godly respect for your leaders and give them your utmost patience as they wade through these matters for the entire congregation/ministry.



Northern Illinois District

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

- Seek to be yielding to your brothers and sisters in Christ who may be weaker of faith.
- Be Christ-like in being mindful of the most vulnerable in your faith community.
- Set the example to set love for one's neighbor over personal preferences to honor Jesus who in love set your needs above His own.
- Do all that is in you to maintain the peace and unity of your congregation, keeping people's access to Word and Sacrament ministry the main thing.
- Do not compare one congregation's practices with your own or feel pressured to implement a practice from another church. Each community of faith is dealing with its own unique setting and circumstances.
- Be aware of the witness for Christ you bring to your surrounding community in all the actions you take as a congregation.

Wearing or not Wearing Masks

Perhaps the greatest issue that is currently facing our congregations and ministries is what their mask wearing policy should be in light of the CDC's report and recent IDPH's statements regarding those who are fully vaccinated. While our state is now stating that those who are fully vaccinated no longer have to wear masks [either outdoors or indoors] in most settings, nor do they need to regard physical distancing measures, most, if not all our district's churches will be dealing with worship attendees who are not 100% vaccinated (for example, young children at this time are not vaccinated). This puts our congregations and ministries in the dilemma of having a fair and caring mask policy for the following reasons:

- Requiring mask wearing for all does not acknowledge our society is moving in the right direction as more people are vaccinated nor the blessings those who have been fully vaccinated are now able to enjoy.
- Setting a policy of masks being optional and asking those who have not been fully vaccinated to continue wearing masks may foment fears that unvaccinated people are simply not wearing masks [putting vulnerable worshipers at risk]. Those who haven't been vaccinated but would want to honor an optional mask practice may also then feel they were pressured to reveal their vaccination status.



Northern Illinois District

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

Possible Best Practice Ideas

Once our state moves into Phase Five of its recovery plan [which could possibly happen by mid-June or early July], wearing masks will be an optional practice. Over these next weeks, congregations may want to consider the following practices regarding masks

1. Continue to have a masks for all policy: While the fully vaccinated can be without masks, for the sake of the vulnerable and weak among us, some congregations may ask their worship attendees to yield in love to continue wearing masks until we have moved to Phase Five and masks are optional for all.
2. Have a section of the sanctuary that is “mask optional:” For those churches whose sanctuary is large enough to maintain physical distancing for those needing to continue wearing masks, they may consider having a designated area where masks need not be worn. However, our Task Force strongly encourages congregations who have this practice to first have an open conversation with members so that there may be unity that this is a good practice for all.
3. Designate a “Fully Vaccinated” service: If your worship schedule allows, your congregation may want to consider holding a “fully vaccinated” service. Again, let there be agreement among the members as to whether or not you would require attendees to offer proof of their vaccination status. This service could then be basically the same as our pre-pandemic worship services.
4. Continue to offer online services for those who feel uncomfortable being at worship in-person: Many churches will continue to put worship services online even when we’ve moved to Phase Five of the state’s recovery plan. Online services allows worshipers to hear the proclamation of God’s Word, receive Christ’s forgiveness in worship, and lift up prayers and praises to our Lord with their local community of faith within the safety of remote participation.

Spacing and Seating Capacity

Fully vaccinated worshipers need not be counted against your sanctuary’s seating capacity. As long as you are able to maintain physical distancing measures for all worshipers, having fully vaccinated worshipers at any service should increase your seating capacity beyond former limits.



Northern Illinois District

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

Replacing of Hymnals and Bibles back in Sanctuary

Many churches have already returned their hymnals and Bibles to their sanctuaries. Our Task Force recommends that if regular and thorough cleaning of the sanctuary [and the entire church campus] be maintained, congregations may return such worship items to their sanctuaries.

Singing

There is still a wide variety of practices within our churches with regard to worship singing. There are services that are completely spoken, some, where only designated singers are singing with physical distance measures, and some, where congregational singing is practiced. Once our state has reached Phase Five of recovery, full participating in singing will be optional for all congregations and all services. Until that time, your congregation may want to continue to offer options that work best for your ministry setting or maintain what you have been doing until we reach Phase Five of the state's plan.

Communion

Many congregations removed the common cup as an option for receiving Communion during the height of the pandemic, and some congregations may never return to offering that option. If your congregation is now considering offering the common cup for Communion distribution, strongly consider maintaining a “touch free” or individual serving option for Communion distribution. It is also encouraged that careful cleaning of the common cup be done throughout distribution.

Continuing until we reach Phase Five

Your congregation may want to continue the following practices until we have entered Phase Five of the state's recovery plan:

- Thorough cleaning of the church after each service
- Registration for worship services
- Maintaining a “touch free” method for gathering the offering
- Maintaining a “touch free” sharing of the peace
- Readily available hand sanitizer dispensers



Northern Illinois District

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

Communication

As your congregation makes transitions and implements new best practices as we move from the Bridge Phase to Phase Five of the state's recovery plan, it is important to use every mode of communication at your disposal to communicate to your members and surrounding community any changes in your in-person worship practices. Be sure that all members have had the chance to participate in your deliberations and whenever changes are being implemented that everyone has had the chance to be informed as to what the changes are, how you came to a decision, and when the changes will first be implemented.

Always Check with Local Health Officials

While the CDC and IDPH will report what scientific studies are revealing as more studies are conducted related to the pandemic, and they will post new recommended guidelines for the good of public health, authority for actually carrying out health standards and mitigation measures rest with local health department officials. Regularly check with your local health department for latest reports and to ask for their input regarding your churches worship practices and health measures.

Thank you and Thanks be to God!



Northern Illinois District

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

Our earnest prayer is that there will come a day soon when the general public is safe from COVID-19, the mitigation measures issued for protection are no longer needed, and churches once again may pursue the proclamation of the Gospel and the sharing of Christ's love free of such concerns. Until such time, our Task Force wishes to express our sincere thanks to you for your diligence in caring for God's people, in seeking ways to maintain Word and Sacrament ministry, and for your heart to continue to bring a faithful witness of Christ to your surrounding community. Above all, thanks be to God for His unfailing grace and mercy in all of our lives and for nurturing in us a Christ-like love to bear with one another in the midst of these trying times! Our Lord Jesus has given us the victory of salvation which the pandemic has not taken away. He will continue to uphold us with His unfailing love and wisdom as our world transitions to a promising future. To Him be the glory!

Respectfully Submitted,

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