

Covid-19 Update for May 12, 2021

We are headed in the right direction in Lincoln County!

Members are asking, “When can we get back to singing, get rid of the sign-up requirement, sit in our own pew again?”

Here are the guidelines from the Wisconsin Council of Churches, an agency that connects and serves 20 Christian denominations or traditions, approximately 2,000 congregations and over one million members. They have been invaluable in translating CDC guidelines for use by churches and have worked with the Wisconsin and county health departments helping us translate these broad guidelines for use in our local Wisconsin communities.

Holding Our Plans Loosely: RETURNING TO CHURCH 2.0

Executive Summary

1. We recommend prioritizing life and health of neighbor in all ministry decisions as a Gospel witness.
2. Concurrent values include creativity (holy experiments), urgency and care in meeting human needs, and attending to diversity and accessibility.
3. Norms of these recommendations include taking seriously the church’s role as community leader and trusting in the resilience of the church.
4. Churches should take a two-step approach to gathering, tracking the following data:

FIRST, watch vaccination rates. When more than 50% of the population has been vaccinated, we can expect that it will begin to have an impact on viral transmission (although “herd immunity” will not likely be fully reached until vaccination rates exceed 75%).

THEN, track COVID cases per 100,000 population and the rates of positive tests. Our safer threshold for gathering is when cases are less than 5 per 100,000 population and positive tests less than 10%. Safest would be even lower.

Here is a chart that we find helpful:

UNSAFE TO GATHER	MAKE IT SAFER	SAFEST
Vaccination rates <50%	Vaccination rates 50-70+%	Vaccination rates 70-85+%
Viral Transmission ♦ Cases >10/100K ♦ Positive Tests >10%	Viral Transmission ♦ Cases 5-10/100K ♦ Positive Tests <10%	Viral Transmission ♦ Cases <1/100K ♦ Positive Tests <5%

UNSAFE	MAKE IT SAFER	SAFEST
All at once Unmasked No distancing Full capacity Assembly singing Eating together	♦ Face masks mandatory ♦ Physical distancing ♦ Low-touch environment ♦ Outdoors or increased air exchange ♦ Shortened time of service ♦ Singing by worship leaders only ♦ Focus on sanitizing high-touch surfaces ♦ Sign-in / attendance list	♦ All of the “make it safer” plus no or minimized singing ♦ Hybrid, phased plan ♦ Wait 1 month+ between phases ♦ Fallback plan for outbreaks ♦ Communication plan ♦ Team responsibility

Looking at the top box above, our case burden of 56.3 as of May 11, 2021 is still considered moderately high, remember we are looking for a case burden of between 5 and 10 (or lower). Our vaccination rates are consistent with the Wisconsin rates. Our positive case numbers are low. So, we are right between the “unsafe to gather” and “safer” criteria.

In the box outlining precautions, we are adhering as best we can to the “Make It Safer” box. Vaccination rates in Lincoln County today show 40.4% have received their second dose or the one dose J&J vaccine, 34.2% have received one dose of the 2 dose vaccines. We also have the communication plans; the Council is the team taking responsibility for monitoring the situation and we have begun a hybrid worship plan, so we are paying close attention to the recommendations of the “safest” guidelines.

When the case burden gets under 10 and when the vaccination rates get to between 50 and 70%, we can increase attendance to 100 and return to singing the last hymn of the day. We anticipate reaching those numbers about the same time the choir would be returning to practice and get ready for the program year in the fall. The timing we hope will be right.

When vaccination rates get toward that 70% or higher level, we can return to limited singing with masks and start having some lovingly distanced fellowship meals and other gatherings.

In the meantime, we are planning to have some outdoor worship services at least one evening a month. If they prove popular, we may do them weekly.

We will continue to ask you to sign up to attend worship, even when we go to just the 9am service beginning May 30. This small request helps those who are hesitant to come to public gatherings the ability to see how many will be attending so they can decide how they want to attend—in person or by radio/livestream—and it will allow us to notify you if we learn that you have been exposed to an active case of Covid-19 by someone in attendance before they become symptomatic.

Each of us plays an important part in returning the church and the community to “normal.” We demonstrate our Christian love for one another and our Christian concern for our local businesses by continuing to wear our masks in public, continuing to pay attention to hand hygiene and encouraging those who can safely receive the vaccine to do so.

We are headed in the right direction. It has been a long road, especially for those who have had the disease and those who have lost loved ones to the disease.

This is a spiritual battle as well as a public health concern. We do not act out of fear but out of the deep and abiding love of Christ and his admonition, “They will know you are my followers by how you love one another.”

Not by how we stand up for our personal feelings, but by how we set aside our fears and anxieties and live out of love. If Jesus can stoop to wash the feet of the disciples, we can certainly wear a mask, wash our hands and worship differently a little bit longer.

This year has been tiresome, frustrating, grievous, and for so many, overwhelming. It has also been an opportunity to deepen our prayer life and deepen our love for a savior who would die for us. In comparison, he seems to ask so little of us—just love one another. We have the opportunity to demonstrate that love in concrete action. The way to a deeper relationship with Christ is always through humble action. Let us move forward with love and humility. Let us keep the faith and continue to demonstrate our love for one another in this final sprint to the goal before us.

Grace and Peace,

Pastor Mike