

Southwest Conference COVID 19 Update – 8/23/2021

CDC BOTTOM LINE: If not vaccinated, **get vaccinated**. To maximize protection from the Delta variant and prevent possibly spreading it to others even if you are fully vaccinated, **wear a mask in public gatherings while indoors**, if you are in an area of substantial or high transmission (currently includes all areas where we have SWC churches). Other medical sites, such as the Mayo Clinic advise wearing masks outdoor for larger gatherings such as weddings. This seems to apply to church service gatherings.

BOTTOM LINE AS PERSONS OF FAITH: We are called to address the needs of the most vulnerable among us. At this time it is clearly the children, for whom no vaccination is available, who are most vulnerable as well as those with compromised immune systems and underlying health conditions. This requires, at times, the sacrifices of comfort and convenience for those holding privilege.

Delta Variant: What We Know:

1. The previous downward trajectory of transmissions has been dramatically reversed. Reported cases of COVID are now at levels similar to BEFORE the vaccine was widely available.
2. The Delta variant is nearly twice as infectious as previous variants and is leading to increased transmissibility when compared to other variants, even in vaccinated individuals. Delta is currently the prominent strain of the virus in the United States and causes more severe illness than previous strains. The vast majority of current hospitalizations due to COVID are those who have not been vaccinated. Cases of COVID in children are dramatically rising (hospitalizations of children have more than tripled in the last month).
3. Unvaccinated people remain the greatest concern. This not only includes those that are resistant to getting the vaccine, but children and those with underlying medical conditions that may prevent them from being vaccinated. Although fully vaccinated people can also have “breakthrough” infections, the infections are often less severe, and don’t require hospitalization. However, there are reported cases of severe breakthrough infections, even resulting in death.
4. Fully vaccinated people are likely infectious for less time than unvaccinated people. However, fully vaccinated people who are positive for the COVID virus may not have severe symptoms or may not have symptoms at all that would alert them to the need for caution. But they can infect others who are vulnerable and they can be carriers of the virus in the larger population, including vulnerable persons and those who have chosen not to be vaccinated.
5. The most effective prevention is to continue to spread accurate information that is up-to-date. This requires attending to new information frequently. Then, use all the mitigating strategies you can use, layering them for greatest impact. These strategies include the location of gatherings where there is greatest ventilation, wearing masks in all indoor settings and in large groups when meeting outside, keeping appropriate distance between individuals or family pods, checking temperatures before admission to gatherings, providing hand sanitizing fluid and encouraging its use.

What We Recommend:

- PLEASE encourage your folks to get vaccinated.
- At this time, masks should be worn in all in-person settings.
- If you are still virtual in worship and program, stay that way for a while longer until new information leads us to do differently for the most vulnerable: Children and health vulnerable adults. We will also be playing a role in limiting spread in the general population.

- If you are in-person or hybrid, be sure that you are using the COVID 19 Event Risk Planning Assessment Tool to determine the risk factor. At this time, many of our congregations in the SWC are not in areas that show risk at 25% or below, especially if using the ascertainment bias of 5 instead of 3 as recommended by the creators of this tool. For example, using this measure, Pima County churches could meet in groups of 25 and Maricopa County churches could meet in groups of 15. Also consider that a 25% level of risk may not be tolerable for us considering the virulent nature of the Delta variant.
- Stay socially distant.
- There are no current guidelines suggesting that congregational singing in groups is safe.
- Continue using safe ways to have communion when you are worshiping in person. Consider distributing individual servings of the elements as congregants enter the worship area so that they can remain in their socially distanced spaces.
- Don't serve food in large groups gatherings (i.e., fellowship times). Eating requires the removal of masks and is not advisable.
- Tighten up on social distancing during in-person fellowship times (an easy time to forget distance and masking!) when you return to in-person gatherings.
- Provide information about varying levels of mask effectiveness: Cloth masks are the least effective while N-95 (not readily available) and KN-95 masks are the most effective and readily available. Surgical masks are not as effective as N-95 and KN-95 but are more effective than cloth masks, especially if they are adjusted to fit tightly on the face. Face shields are only effective when worn over a mask.
- Educating congregants on this matter is a loving act.
- Establish a team in your local congregation willing to familiarize themselves with current information, meet regularly to discuss this information and make decisions for the congregation.
- Establish protocol for contact tracing should an outbreak occur in your congregation so that you know who has been in the building. For example, this could be accomplished by having people sign in as they enter the sanctuary or, if you are having them register in advance, by checking off their names as they enter.
- With the exception of those with medical contraindications, all church staff should be vaccinated or submit to weekly testing, reporting their results to senior staff.
- Churches might consider having their HVAC systems checked for proper filtering and ventilation.

Our denominational core values include welcoming everyone (regardless of vaccination status) but – to do that, we also are responsible for maintaining safe space as best as we are able for everyone. This requires:

- ❖ Some sacrifice of comfort and convenience by those with privilege and responsibility, so others will feel safe and included.
- ❖ Understanding that maintaining communal safety and welcome requires boundaries being set that while all people are welcome, not all behavior is necessarily welcome when it jeopardizes the wellbeing of others.