

## Responding to COVID19 Sustainably – A Pastoral Letter

Beloved Southwest Conference members, grace and peace to you from God our Creator, Jesus our brother, and God’s wise, comforting, and accompanying Spirit.

When the pandemic began in March, 2020, all of us looked forward to the day when COVID19 would no longer threaten our health and our lives. We know now that COVID19 will always be with us. Our initial responses to COVID19 called for giving up meeting together, hugging, shaking hands, using hymnals and offering plates, and dozens of other ways of interacting that feed and nurture the deepest parts of ourselves. We know now that we cannot permanently surrender those ways of being together and remain whole and healthy mentally and spiritually. Our initial response to the pandemic was constructed without benefit of vaccines. We now have [safe](#) and [effective](#) vaccines that will soon be available for every person over 4 years of age. Considering what we know now, we do well to shift from a crisis-based approach to a sustainable model for responding to COVID19.

A sustainable response to COVID19 will:

- balance the continuing risk of illness and death from SARS-CoV-2 with our basic human needs for companionship, community, and quality of life.
- encourage people to get vaccinated or receive a booster if they are eligible and have not already done so.
- offer opportunities for people to gather safely while supporting individual choices about whether or not to participate.
- set clear expectations and participation boundaries for church activities including masking and social distancing requirements,
- find ways to include virtual participation in ministry activities,
- monitor decisions of parents related to their children participating in non-church group activities, and allow those trends to inform decisions about church programs for children, and
- use open-air venues for gatherings as often as possible.

Tools like the [COVID-19 Event Risk Assessment Planning Tool](#) continue to be useful for local church leaders as they make decisions. These tools require interpretation based on local factors. The assessment does not offer a risk factor for contracting COVID19. “The risk level is the estimated chance (0-100%) that at least 1 COVID-19 positive individual will be present at an event in a county, given the size of the event.”<sup>1</sup> The vaccination status of participants at church events can impact that percentage, something for which the tool by itself cannot account. The vast majority of new COVID19 cases happen among unvaccinated people; less than 0.08% of vaccinated people have experienced a ‘break through’ COVID19 infection.<sup>2</sup> Many organizers are

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<sup>1</sup> <https://covid19risk.biosci.gatech.edu/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/breakthrough-covid-cases-least-125-000-fully-vaccinated-americans-have-n1275500>

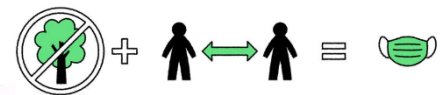
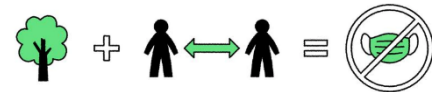
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beginning to limit event participation based on vaccination status. Crafting a sustainable response to COVID19 invites church leaders to revisit this possibility based on [what science is telling us now](#). The SWC Executive Board is requiring proof of vaccination for delegates to the 2020 in-person annual meeting.

### Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

Keeping church members healthy and safe when they choose to participate in the activities offered by their local church is our priority. The SWC continues to recommend clergy and ministry settings observe the “two-out-of-three rule” when the vaccination status of all people in attendance is *not* known.

- Outside + Social Distance (6ft min.) = no mask required
- Outside + NO social distance = mask required
- NOT Outside + Social Distance = mask required (even when speaking/presenting)



Maintaining the “two-out-of-three rule” allows congregations to return to activities like **singing**<sup>3</sup> during worship.

In April, 2021, the [CDC released new guidance about porous and nonporous surfaces](#) and the transmission of COVID19.<sup>4</sup> Coronavirus survives a very limited amount of time on porous surfaces (like paper), a little longer on nonporous surfaces (wood/metal). Given the low risk of viral transmission on surfaces, the use of **bulletins and hymnals** (as long as masks are worn for singing) can be considered now.

In most communities, children are attending school, daycare, and other family activities. This reality invites churches to reconsider policies that prohibit **children’s programming** or isolate children from adults in the church building.

If anyone in a household is **feeling sick** within 24 hours of scheduled events, that household should not attend those events.

If someone participating in a church event is **diagnosed with COVID19** within 14 days of the gathering, event planners need to notify their local church; the church needs to take appropriate steps to alert other attendees of possible exposure to COVID19.

### Theological Grounding

In the New Testament the word ‘you’ appears in the singular 37% of the time, while the word ‘you’ is plural 63% of the time.<sup>5</sup> While plural pronouns and verbs include applications to

<sup>3</sup> Congregational hymns, choirs, solos, etc.

<sup>4</sup> “...based on available epidemiological data and studies of environmental transmission factors, surface transmission is not the main route by which SARS-CoV-2 spreads, and the risk is considered to be low. “

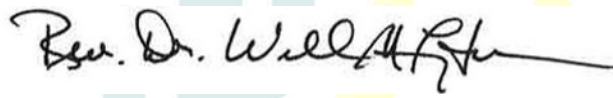
<sup>5</sup> <https://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/35019/english-translation-of-you-in-the-new-testament>

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individual faith,<sup>6</sup> Christianity is not all about individual salvation or personal relationship to God. Christian faith is about community, the common good, and the role an individual in achieving them. This theological foundation guides a progressive Christian COVID19 response. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus... <sup>7</sup>

We are the beneficiaries of many sustainable responses to lethal illnesses (flu, polio, etc.) We cannot eliminate all risk of viruses making us sick or claiming our lives. For the reasons mentioned here and many others, I am convinced that the moment for such a shift in churches' responses to COVID19 is necessary. The guidance and suggestions in this letter are not exhaustive. I share them with our congregations and clergy as a place from which to begin conversations about what a sustainable response to COVID19 looks like in each congregation, in their wider community, and within the life and ministry of the Southwest Conference. Let's enter such conversations committed to learning from one another, adapting as necessary to the ever-changing realities of COVID19, and doing everything possible to ensure the physical, mental, and spiritual health and wellbeing of all our neighbors.

In love, gratitude, and your service,



Rev. Dr. William M. Lyons  
Conference Minister



Southwest Conference  
United Church of Christ

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<sup>6</sup>

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/251573358> Plural You On the Use and Abuse of the Second Person in New Testament Greek

<sup>7</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version\*](#). (1989). (Php 2:3–5). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.