



Rocky Mountain Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

URGENT: Updated pandemic recommendations for congregations and ministries

July 31, 2021

Dear Colleagues in Christ,

When the Rocky Mountain Synod Council issued the February 16, 2021 [Updated recommendations for navigating the next chapter in our pandemic landscape](#) the conditions called for cautious optimism. Vaccinations were already proving to be extremely effective against COVID-19 and as more people had access to the vaccines, it felt safer to consider regathering in person. The uncertainties then had to do with the rate of vaccinations, the availability of vaccines for children, and the impact of the COVID variants. By mid-May the CDC felt confident enough about the progress of the situation that it changed its recommendation, stating that vaccinated individuals could discontinue their use of face coverings in certain indoor situations, especially when gathering with other vaccinated people.

Through the early summer, the outlook remained hopeful. Many congregations began to gather in person again, both outdoors and indoors. Some felt comfortable allowing for greater flexibility on the use of face coverings or social distancing, especially when very high percentages of parishioners were known to be vaccinated and transmission rates were low. Updated recommendations felt unnecessary as ministry leaders navigated the balance between caution and possibility in each local context.

Today that hopeful landscape has been complicated by the growth of the Delta variant, a highly transmissible version of COVID-19 that poses the same risk of illness, hospitalization and death for unvaccinated people as the original strain. While being vaccinated still greatly reduces the risk of contracting COVID, being hospitalized or dying, evidence now shows that with the Delta variant a fully vaccinated person can both contract and transmit COVID.¹ That risk is greatest in areas where transmission rates for the Delta variant are high, or when protocols around face coverings and social distancing are not respected. It is for this reason that ***our urgent recommendation is for all congregations gathering in-person to continue or reimplement the use of face-coverings and social distancing, especially indoors, and to limit activities that risk spreading the virus such as corporate singing or speaking.*** It is also our recommendation that congregations require all staff members be vaccinated whenever possible, and that all congregants be urged in the strongest terms to be vaccinated before participating in any in-person worship or event. Until COVID has completely run its course, we must remain vigilant and be prepared to adjust our activities and behavior to prevent unnecessary illness or death.

¹ The CDC website has extensive information on COVID-19 including the Delta variant. For information on the recommendations for those who are fully vaccinated, see: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/fully-vaccinated.html>

We recognize that everyone is utterly fatigued by the impacts of pandemic life, and that the idea of moving back to more stringent safeguards feels frustrating. Yet as members of Christ's Church, we place the highest value on safeguarding the well-being of our neighbor. Our concern must continue to focus on protecting the most vulnerable, including those who are unable to be vaccinated or those who are not yet eligible, including children.

Martin Luther famously wrote in his treatise, Freedom of a Christian: ***A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.*** Advocating for the use of vaccinations and insisting on pandemic protocols in these uncertain times is not a question of freedom – it is a question of serving Christ by loving our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Thank you for all you are doing in your context to reflect Christ's compassion, grace and love.

Yours in Faith,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jim Gonia". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Bishop Jim Gonia

Approved by Rocky Mountain Synod Council, July 31, 2021

To track the rate of COVID transmission in your local context, see:

<https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#datatracker-home>