



## Considerations for Church Gatherings during COVID-19

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“You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only don’t let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses but serve each other through love.” Galatians 5:13 CEB

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ADN believes that our church family is complete when all people are welcome and fully included. The COVID pandemic has raised concerns about gathering safely, particularly for people who are medically vulnerable. People with disabilities may be affected more severely by COVID infection because of health conditions or compromised immunity. As an Anabaptist network called to raise awareness of the contributions and needs of people with disabilities in our congregations, we offer the following guidance when considering ways for us all to gather as safely as possible.

While the severity of COVID has decreased due to the availability of vaccinations, the risk of infection is still present in most communities to a varying degree. This risk fluctuates with the rise and fall of infection rates. Just like the flu and the common cold, it seems that the COVID virus is here to stay. But COVID poses a greater risk, especially for people with disabilities and particular health conditions. Even with mild COVID cases in healthy people, the risk of contracting long COVID exists, including the risk of becoming disabled.

What, then is our call when living in Christian community? How might we collectively work for shalom, for total well-being, in our communities? How might we gather, be present to one another in shared space, for the good of all?

Vaccination and boosters prevent COVID infections from certain strands of COVID. They also reduce the incidence of severe infection, hospitalization, and death. It seems good to us that each person who is able to be vaccinated do so, in order to protect their own health and the health of others, especially those who are unable to be vaccinated due to health conditions (e.g. people on chemotherapy) or age (e.g. infants).

Masking is a good way to prevent the spread of infection, not only of COVID but other viruses such as the flu and RSV. We don’t always know when we are infected, but we might consider how much risk we pose to other people. People who spend a lot of time in public settings should consider masking at church because they are a higher risk to

others. People who are medically vulnerable should mask whenever possible. However, we should not limit masking to those who are disabled or medically vulnerable, thereby stigmatizing an already stigmatized group of people. And some who are medically vulnerable, such as infants, are unable to mask. The burden of protection should not rest solely on vulnerable people but should be shouldered by the entire community as an act of mutual care.

Consider universal masking in large groups. The larger the group, the greater the risk of infection.

People who know they are sick should stay home and not put others at risk. This can seem difficult when we carry important responsibilities. But in the priesthood of all believers, we can trust that the community will carry those responsibilities for us in our absence. Testing to determine if we are infected when we have been exposed to COVID is an act of caring for others.

Steps can be taken to improve air quality in our meeting places. We can make sure there is good air movement and ventilation. We can use HEPA filters and air purifiers.

Congregations should monitor local infection rates and base masking policies on the prevalence of COVID in their community. Our policies can be responsive to the best information we have available to us in the moment.

We can creatively consider the ways that we might safely gather, including but not limited to:

- Meeting outside where risk of infection is lower.
- Gathering in small groups of those who choose to mask for the sake of others for prayer and Bible study.
- Having an online option for worship and other gatherings, paying attention that those attending virtually are truly included and not just observers.
- Having a mask-mandatory Sunday once a month, so that those who are safer with universal masking can attend in person.

As the body of Christ, we can go beyond the concept of making “reasonable accommodations” for people with disabilities and consider how we can create a community of love, acceptance and welcome for all.