

January 2022

Updated COVID-19 Pandemic Recommendations

Conference Office, Hawai'i Conference United Church of Christ

What's New in the 2022 Recommendations:

These updated Recommendations take into consideration some of the newer conversations and insights around the COVID pandemic, including the Omicron variant as well as adjusting cultural norms to life during the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. In this update you will find attention given to the issue of religious exemptions, an updated understanding of masks, and age recommendations for vaccination and boosters. You will also find a return to the perennial issues of church autonomy, ethics, singing, and mitigation of risk factors.

The Hawai'i Conference Office appreciates the difficult discussions and hard decisions you are having to make around COVID safety for your church 'ohana. These recommendations are designed to help you navigate this pandemic as an ongoing reality in the life of your congregation.

Autonomy of the Local Church:

By UCC polity the decisions around handling the risks of the COVID-19 pandemic rest in the hands of the local congregation not in the hands of the Hawai'i Conference staff.

Ethical Commitments:

Loving our neighbors is an inherent call of the Christian faith. All entities within the Hawai'i Conference and partnered with the Conference are bound by covenant to share God's aloha in all circumstances as widely as we can. To enhance our aloha, the Conference Office suggests continued compliance with all federal, state, and county laws and ordinances regarding the novel coronavirus and its variants for the health and well-being of your congregation. A congregation may choose to be more strict than governmental pronouncements, but a congregation being less stringent than governmental guidance is in violation of the covenant to share God's aloha.

Respect for one another's well-being should continue to inform our ethical compass. At the heart of respect is our ability and responsibility to keep each other safe and free from harm. It is our place as pastors and congregational leaders to guide our congregants into respectful and loving behavior toward one another during the continuing COVID-19 pandemic.

Working with New Understandings of COVID-19:

What we know about the spread and risks of the coronavirus has changed significantly since the pandemic began. These recommendations reflect what we know (mid-January 2022). They are derived from a variety of scientific, ministry, and government sources, examples of which are referenced. Application of these recommendations can vary depending on your island context.

Further, the January 2022 updated recommendations are designed as a resource for your congregation in its process of navigating the continuing pandemic.

We acknowledge that our congregations represent a variety of contexts including the size of facility, size of worshipping community, island context, and ability to access online platforms. Not everything listed here is applicable to every congregation. Please use what is relevant to your context.

Encourage People to Be Vaccinated:

The more people in each congregation who are fully vaccinated, the safer it will be for churches. Some individuals will not be eligible for the vaccine based on their health conditions or personal beliefs. Partnering with community health organizations to offer information about vaccines, supporting people as they express anxiety about receiving or not qualifying for a vaccination, and listening to and providing opportunities for folks to express concerns about vaccinating will be important aspects of pastoral ministry in the months to come. You may consider creating care teams to provide valuable ministry in this regard.

The Hawai'i Conference Office recommends waiting for 40% to 50% of the state population or 75% of your church membership to be fully vaccinated before conducting in-person worship. "Fully vaccinated" is a changing term and church leaders should continue to return to this phrase to ensure local church policies reflect an accurate understanding. At the writing of the January 2022 Recommendations, "fully vaccinated" is understood as having received the vaccination shot/shots (depending on vaccination) plus a booster for those 18 and older. See chart for younger children.

**CDC recommends everyone ages 5 and older get a COVID-19 vaccine to help protect against COVID-19.
Vaccines are not approved for age 4 and under**

Authorized For	Pfizer-BioNTech	Moderna	J&J / Janssen
4 years and under	NO	NO	NO
5 – 11 years old	YES	NO	NO
12 – 17 years old	YES	NO	NO
18 years and older	YES	YES	YES

Widespread vaccination for COVID-19 is a critical tool to best protect everyone from COVID-19 and COVID-19 related complications.

The Hawai'i Conference Office also recommends ongoing attention to spread rates on your island. Spread rates are tracked at the Department of Health's website:

<https://health.hawaii.gov/coronavirusdisease2019/>. To further understand risks levels, we encourage congregational leaders to be in touch with your Mayor's office.

1. Acknowledging there are a variety of reasons why people may not be vaccinated, the Conference Office strongly recommends **not** requiring vaccinations as a condition of participation in church life.
2. Personnel policies for employees of a congregation may require staff members to be vaccinated or undergo regular testing. This is a decision of the church leadership.

Religious Exemptions for Employees:

The question of religious exemptions is a thorny issue for the United Church of Christ. Typically, this expression of the Christian faith understands advancement of medical knowledge as advancement in God's providential care of creation. Yet, our faith tradition holds that each individual may order their life according to the guidance of the Holy Spirit without unnecessary interference by others. The one speaks to a view of God's handiwork and the other to the freedom of conscience. At present these two streams of thought are clashing around the issue of religious exemptions.

U.S. laws require that employers allow for religious exemption if the belief is a sincerely held religious belief that can be reasonably accommodated. The Hawai'i Conference Office, in conversation with church leaders across the islands, suggests the following items be kept in mind as you work through the issue of religious exemptions and reasonable accommodations for your employees:

1. Ask what, if any, accommodations can be made. There is no reason to grant a religious exemption if the facility cannot accommodate for the exemption.
 - a. Asking a person to test on a regular basis is an easy accommodation to grant. Working from home might be available. Setting up an isolation room is probably past a church's ability to accommodate.
 - b. Think expansively on what it means to accommodate. A person who has chosen not to vaccinate working in close proximity with vulnerable populations may not be reasonably accommodated due to the nature of their job. A person working from home or within a quarantine bubble might be reasonably accommodated as their daily routine would not necessarily bring them into contact with vulnerable populations.
 - c. Apply the accommodation rule evenly and fairly.
2. There are multiple reasons for not seeking vaccination – philosophical, medical, political, cultural, etc. These are all legitimate reasons for not vaccinating. However, they are not religious reasons. Work from a point of view that the belief is sincere to the individual and the real question is, "is it religious?"
3. Some items to think about in terms of a criteria for "religious belief":
 - a. Theology can be articulated. What constellation of sacred texts and theological expressions are involved with this belief? What is the source of the teaching and its history within the faith community of the one asking for an exemption? How is the belief lived out by the faith community the person is a part of?

- b. Religious practices are communal. Is this an item the community has spoken directly about or an item that is articulated through non-direct indicators? What practices around this belief are shared by the community of faith? How is the belief lived out in the denomination the person is a part of?
- c. There should be an historical aspect to the belief. What history of the person can be pointed at that indicates the belief is an active part of their spirituality? Is there a history of consistent practice of this belief by the individual? Does the belief engage ultimate ethical concerns of the person?

COVID-19 Risk Assessment Planning Tool:

The Hawai'i Conference Office continues to encourage local church leaders to use the *COVID-19 Event Risk Assessment Planning Tool* (<https://covid19risk.biosci.gatech.edu/>) to determine the risk an in-person event might pose to participants.

This tool, provided by the Georgia Institute of Technology, determines “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.” Please note, this is not the same as the risk of any person being exposed or infected with COVID-19 at the gathering. However, knowing the likelihood of one COVID-19 positive person being present at an activity can help church leaders decide if the benefits of holding the event outweigh the possibility of exposing participants to a COVID-positive person. In your congregation’s protocol or policy for holding in-person gatherings, you will need to determine the thresholds you will use to allow gatherings of various sizes to take place. Thresholds will include both group size and the risk factor.

Layered Strategy to Prevent Viral Spread:

The Hawai'i Conference Office continues to endorse the Center for Disease Control recommendation of using layered or multiple strategies for COVID-19 spread mitigation to lower the risk of exposure:

1. It is recommended that N95 masks if available or double masks be worn by all participants during the entire duration of in-person gatherings regardless the vaccination status of participants for the foreseeable future.
 - a. People who are asymptomatic, who have recovered from COVID-19, and even people who have been vaccinated can spread the virus to other people.
 - b. Physical distancing does not reduce the need for wearing masks. It works in tandem with other strategies.
 - c. Vaccination does not prevent an individual from being infected with the virus and spreading it; vaccinations can reduce the chance of someone becoming ill and can reduce the severity of a person’s illness if they are infected.
2. Physical distancing practices need to continue at all in-person activities regardless of size for the foreseeable future.
 - a. The distance currently recommended by the CDC is at least 6 feet.
 - b. Both early and recent scientific studies suggest a larger distance is necessary for choirs, solo singers, and public speakers. The recommendation is for 12 to 15 feet between the performers and the audience.

- c. Congregational singing should be done with masks on. If there is congregational singing, 9-foot distancing is recommended.
 - d. The number of persons involved in any gathering needs to be limited by the event location's capacity for maintaining physical distance.
- 3. Hand washing remains a CDC recommended COVID-19 mitigation strategy. This is especially important when performing sacraments, distributing communion, and other activities that involve passing items between individuals. Wearing gloves and planning contactless methods for common activities in worship remain best practices.
 - o Maintaining a "low touch environment" is a best practice for in-person gatherings.
- 4. Cleaning surfaces:
 - a. Areas unoccupied for 7 or more days need only routine cleaning.
 - b. Maintain existing cleaning practices for outdoor areas.
 - c. Routinely disinfect frequently touched surfaces at least daily.
 - d. The latest CDC guidance about cleaning surfaces is available online here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>.
- 5. Ventilation and air flow play critical roles in mitigating the spread of COVID-19 according to recently published research. The Hawai'i Conference Office strongly recommends implementing as many of the CDC guidelines as possible:
 - a. Increase outdoor air ventilation by using caution in highly polluted areas.
 - b. Decrease occupancy in areas where outdoor ventilation cannot be increased.
 - c. Increase airflow to occupied spaces when possible.
 - d. Set HVAC fans to the "on" position for all occupied area of the building; turn off any demand-controlled ventilation (DCV) controls that reduce air supply based on occupancy or temperature during occupied hours.
 - e. Open outdoor air dampers beyond minimum settings to reduce or eliminate HVAC air recirculation.
 - f. Ensure exhaust fans (restroom, kitchen) are functional and operating at full capacity when the building is occupied.
 - g. Consider portable high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) fan/filtration systems to help enhance air cleaning.
 - h. Generate clean-to-less-clean air movement by re-evaluating the positioning of supply and exhaust air diffusers and/or dampers.
 - i. Research also indicates care be taken to avoid seating persons in the direct steam of air flowing into or out of a room.

Please consult the complete CDC Guidelines for Ventilation in Building: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/ventilation.html>.

Outdoor Events:

The Hawai'i Conference Office recommends holding in-person gatherings outdoors whenever possible. Outdoor gatherings still include mitigation strategies—masks, physical distancing, hand sanitizing stations as discussed above. Drive-in events are one form of outdoor gatherings and need to include masks and physical distance between vehicles, particularly when windows are open; the distance between vehicles provided by regular parking spaces is not sufficient to meet physical distance guidelines.

Inform Renters:

Share these guidelines with outside groups renting or wanting to rent your facility. Allow renters to use your building only if they follow your church's policies. Start with one organization at a time. Cap the total number of groups using the building in a way that prevents outside groups from coming into contact with one another. Require each group to take responsibility for the space they are using (cleaning, set up, returning space to pre-use condition). Groups need to be told that if they do not agree to or do not follow your church policy, they will lose the privilege of renting/using your space. See <https://www.insuranceboard.org/preparing-your-church-property-after-lockdown/> for information on how to prepare buildings and grounds that have not been in use.

Work Space:

If staff members are working in their offices, the Hawai'i Conference Office recommends following the CDC Guidance for Businesses and Employers to maintain a safe working environment: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-business-response.html>.

Other Issues to Consider:

1. What staffing patterns and schedules are needed?
2. How can we sustainably meet the demands of doing ministry in new ways?
3. Are we talking with all our stakeholders?
4. What previous practices are obsolete or need to be adjusted?
5. What can we let go of to create capacity for embracing new things?
6. What were we paying for in our pre-pandemic ministry model? Do we still need to pay for each item, and if so, in the same or in a different way?
7. What new things do we need to pay for?

The Insurance Board has a variety of resources <https://www.insuranceboard.org/safety-central/covid-19-resources/>.

The Hawai'i Conference Office strongly recommends sharing guidelines and recommendations with church members and outside groups. The Conference staff is available as a conversation partner as you update your local church policy and protocols. You are not alone. Our covenant together means your church can tap into the thoughts, practices, and wisdom of leaders in 118 local churches and 5 association communities. Our staff regularly holds space for conversations among covenant partners as we navigate these days.