

Spring 2022

Hawai'i Conference UCC COVID Recommendations

Addendum

What's New

This document does not supersede the January 2022 Updated COVID-19 Pandemic Recommendations. This document is an addendum to address the removal of state and local COVID regulations. Should/when surge occur in your community and local or state government reintroduces restrictions and/or mandates, the January 2022 Updated COVID-19 Pandemic Recommendations still stand.

This document is about moving into a time that is post-pandemic, but not post-COVID. Following the sunset of the State of Hawai'i COVID restrictions it should be informally understood that the archipelago is now addressing the SARS-CoV-2 virus and its multiple variations as endemic. This understanding means that the virus is regularly found in the environment and cannot be eradicated due to its mutations.

This addendum is to help your congregation pivot from your congregation's pandemic protocols to policies that better fit an endemic framework. To make this transition you should give primacy to the context of your congregation for continuing to manage the threat of exposure and spread. Context helps define the measure of your risk management:

1. Is there active spread in your community that is leading to a surge in the transmission of the virus?
2. What percentage of your congregation is considered vulnerable with health issues, age concerns, or non-vaccinated?
3. What is the hospital capacity on your island?
4. How does your congregation continue to hold to the moral compass of the well-being of the community the church serves?

To contextualize our COVID responses means that there will be no one response for all 118 congregations of the Hawai'i Conference. Your congregation's context will determine what is best for your church.

Continuing Risks

The main mitigation against serious health issues arising from COVID infection is to encourage your people to update their COVID vaccinations when appropriate. Update means the original vaccination plus all boosters that have been recommended for the person's age group. The vaccination roll out in Hawai'i provided a major impact on reducing the hospitalization and death rates due to COVID infection. As we saw with the Omicron variant, those most affected were those still in need of vaccinations. The Hawai'i Conference Office encourages all members of our churches to be vaccinated.

While the disease is moving into an endemic state, there is still a risk associated with gathering for sustained periods in enclosed spaces. We urge continued caution and monitoring as your congregation adjusts its COVID protocol to your context.

The goal of your congregation should be to move forward safely towards a less COVID-restricted lifestyle. A key of your COVID policy should be keeping infectious spread to a minimum so that the virus and its mutations do not become major disruptive forces as they have been. Towards this end the Conference Office recommends retaining the requirement that any person displaying symptoms of COVID-19 must stay home from the church campus until the virus has run its course.

Masks

The latest variants of the virus are now primarily transmitted via personal oral or nasal aerosol, that is, person-to-person via our breath. The Conference Office recommends the continuation of mask-wearing (over mouth and nose) in these contexts:

- For those in vulnerable populations
- In congregations where the vaccination rate is below 70%
- In situations where good ventilation and air flow are unavailable
- When the wider community is experiencing a surge in COVID spread
- When communal singing is taking place, we recommend singing with masks on

Social Distancing

There is minimal risk for close contact in the normal church meeting and worship. While your congregation's context may ask for social distancing to be continued, where spread is low and vulnerability is limited, there is not a need for formal social distancing at this time. However, those in attendance should be sensitive to the desires of others around them. Churches need to continue ensuring good ventilation for all its meeting spaces and have hand sanitizers and masks available for those gathering.

Surfaces and Worship Materials

The scientific evidence indicates that the virus is mutating to an aerosol form and that touch transmission (picking up the virus off a surface) is now minimal. If the church context allows, the use of hymn books, pew bibles, and other worship aids can be resumed. We also recommend that if spread occurs within the congregation these items be removed until it is safe to use them again. When spread rates remain low, the usual forms of church cleaning are sufficient. If spread rates increase in your community, you should do more COVID-rigorous cleaning as suggested in the January 2022 Updated COVID-19 Pandemic Recommendations.

Sacraments and Physical Touch

As noted, the recommendation for hand sanitizers at the egress of meeting and worship spaces is still suggested. Further, ministers should sanitize their hands before distributing Holy Communion. There can be a return to the normal mode of celebrating Communion for your congregation under these conditions:

- The congregation has a vaccination rate of 70% or higher

- Those handling and distributing the elements can sanitize their hands before serving
- The wider community is experiencing a low spread rate

The same recommendations hold for other practices that require a physical touch (baptism, anointing, etc.)

Social Activities

When your context allows, suspended activities such as affinity groups, bible studies, youth groups, etc. can resume in-person gatherings (if they have not already). It is further recommended that risk assessments for the activity and space be made by church leaders on a regular basis.

Home Visits

Home visits, if they have been suspended and community context allows, can resume. There should be attention to the number of visits per week to manage risks and potential exposure. Non-vaccinated persons should show a negative over the counter COVID test results before undertaking a session of home visits. It is further recommended that a call be made to the person/family to be visited to assess risks and to reschedule a visit if the virus is present in the home.

Weddings and Funerals

County and State guidance are primary. If hosted at a venue other than the church facilities, compliance with venue guidelines is expected. If hosted at the church, compliance with the church's COVID policies by participants should be the norm.

Preschool and Private Education Ministries

All preschool and private education ministries are to be run in compliance with State Department of Education guidelines and expectations for COVID management.

Moral Compass

While the reduction of restrictions brings with it a more normal way of living, the COVID-19 virus is still in circulation. This should remain in the mind of those participating in church life. Paying attention to your church's context and remaining flexible while being diligent should allow you to return to more pre-COVID activities and at the same time honor the well-being of the community.