

What does the VACCINE mean for plans to reopen our churches and ministry settings?

Executive Summary: The increasing availability of vaccines does not change the cautious guidance of the Greater Northwest Area of The United Methodist Church (GNW) regarding COVID-19, though their adoption may have an impact. It remains our position that as the number of *infections decrease* the probability of *in-person gatherings increases*. Due to continued concern of asymptomatic spread, even after vaccination, and the emergence of highly contagious variants, the restrictions around in-person gatherings and the recommendations to mask, distance and sanitize as laid out in the Reimagining Life Together document must still remain in effect.

Introduction

Jesus says, *"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."* (John 10:10b, NIV).

As vaccines offer what feels like tangible hope to end this global pandemic, United Methodists continue to be called to reflect and respond to Jesus' intention that **all** "would have life and have it to the full." This takes us beyond simple hope and launches us to ask and act out what justice, mercy and love for all look like as individuals and as a community. We need to ask, even as we protect ourselves, how can we best protect "all." The churches and ministries of the GNW have invested much, spiritually, emotionally, and personally in our Wesleyan understanding of "Do no harm."

There are now several vaccines being distributed, providing safety to the person vaccinated, and hope for the future. However, it will take time to administer enough vaccinations to return to anticipated signs of "normalcy."

[The Center for Disease Control](#) has stated:

Not enough information is currently available to say if or when CDC will stop recommending that people [wear masks](#) and [avoid close contact with others](#) to help prevent the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19.

Experts need to understand more about the protection that COVID-19 vaccines provide in real-world conditions before making that decision. Other factors, including how many people get vaccinated and how the virus is spreading in communities, will also affect this decision.

[Johns Hopkins University](#) notes:

Until we substantially reduce community transmission of SARS-CoV-2, and see hospitalizations and deaths dramatically decrease, we still need to wear masks and practice physical distancing even after vaccination. The vaccine is not 100% effective and we still do not know if someone who was vaccinated can develop asymptomatic infection and transmit the virus.

How Does this Relate to Current Reopening Plans?

Because we don't know how vaccines effect asymptomatic transmission, it is important to first commend those of our United Methodist faith communities for their efforts this far, while also recognizing asymptomatic spread and the potential for more virulent variants to emerge. Because of the continued threat COVID poses, [Reimagining Life Together](#) (RLT) guidelines must *still remain in effect*.

Even as vaccines raise expectations for a return to normalcy and in-person worship and gatherings, *it is still important to practice community masking, physical distancing, and hand hygiene along with following the best available science and public health guidance*. This applies to all aspects of church and ministry life (e.g., worship, small groups, service projects) and is as important as ever, especially as new, more contagious variants emerge.

COVID Risk Levels as provided on a county-level by [CovidActNow.org](#) are currently being used as guidelines by the GNW Area and its regional leadership (DS/DCM) for approving protocols for in-person worship and activities. It is important to note that as vaccines "take hold" in the greater portion of our surrounding population we will likely see these COVID Risk Levels go down, thus allowing the potential for in-person gatherings to go up.

Where Can I Find Some of the Official Information About Vaccines?

- [Alaska Department of Health and Social Services](#)
- [Idaho Official Resources for the Novel Coronavirus](#)
- [Idaho Department of Health and Welfare](#)
- [Oregon Health Authority](#)
- [Washington State Department of Health](#)

Actions My Church or Ministry Setting Can Take

As our current situation proceeds, it gives us, as United Methodists, the motivation to encourage, and actively communicate how, where and when to get vaccinated, as much as for self as potentially for others.

Check local health websites for vaccinations and also do not hesitate to network locally to find other means of vaccination. **Most importantly, let your community know their options for obtaining the vaccine and the importance of being vaccinated. Be aware of those who are not "tech savvy."** Much of the information about and access to vaccinations are found on the internet.

You can also teach your congregation or ministry partners about some of the [myths about COVID-19 vaccines](#), how they have been tested and approved thoroughly, and will be needed in our fight against COVID.