

## **FAQ: Vaccine mandate guidance for GNW Area Ministries**

*The following FAQ attempts to speak to church/ministry-specific questions and should not be understood as an alternative to guidance provided by the public health department. If similar mandates are issued in other parts of the GNW, ministries should defer to the guidance offered by those public health authorities, complemented by the general approach offered below.*

### **What is our guidance in response to the vaccine mandate issued in King County, WA?**

Public health officials in King County, Washington issued a vaccine mandate\* to go into effect on October 25, 2021. All United Methodist churches and other ministries operating in cities, counties, or states where a vaccine mandate exists should develop and implement a plan to require proof of vaccination or negative test as required by any health order. This applies regardless of whether those ministries are in Option 1 or 2 of the [“Stepping Forward Safely...”](#) framework. Churches and other ministries may make missional exceptions from such a mandate when a particular program or outreach is focused toward a vulnerable population.

*\*Seattle & King County Public Health has a “frequently asked questions” section on the [“Vaccination verification” resource page](#), which should be reviewed in its entirety by ministry leaders in King County, WA.*

### **Is the Greater Northwest Area issuing a vaccine mandate for all its churches and ministries?**

No, the GNW is only requiring all of its churches in King County, WA, to adopt a vaccine mandate at this time. If other cities, counties, boroughs, or states issue a similar public health order in the future, this guidance will also apply to ministries in those areas.

### **Seattle & King County Public Health is only “strongly encouraging” faith communities to adopt vaccine verification. Why does the GNW require churches and ministries in Option 1 & 2 to comply?**

We have been consistent in asking United Methodist ministries to follow and adopt CDC and local or state public health guidelines throughout the pandemic, choosing the most cautious when this guidance deviated. We also asked ministries not to avail themselves of loopholes afforded to religious organizations when other like-sized organizations are asked to abide by the public health guidelines or orders. United Methodist Churches are taking this action, consistent with our Christian commitment to doing no harm and protecting the health of people served by the Church and the general public.

### **Exceptions are allowed for special “missional” circumstances. What would a missional exception to a public health-issued mandate look like?**

A church might make a missional exception when a particular ministry or outreach works with or is primarily directed toward a vulnerable community. One example might be a soup kitchen for persons experiencing homelessness. A missional exception should not be used to avoid difficult conversations with members who are ideologically opposed to vaccinations.

### **Doesn't checking vaccine cards at the door exclude people who aren't vaccinated?**

No, unvaccinated people have the option of providing a recent, negative COVID test to participate in person. And in many places, they may choose to participate virtually online.

Allowing unvaccinated persons who do not provide a negative COVID test result to be present in person, prevents vulnerable people from participating safely.

### **What about children and others who are unvaccinated?**

The requirements of King County's mandate do not apply to children under the age of 12. People

who are age 12+ and unvaccinated or cannot prove vaccination status must show proof of a negative COVID-19 test in the last 72 hours. For more information, review [the county's FAQ](#).

### **How do we verify someone's vaccination or testing result?**

Seattle & King County Public Health has promised additional resources for organizations that will help to answer this question. Additionally, they are partnering with a vendor MyIRMobile to provide a certificate or QR code that churches might use. Ministries are encouraged to think through the process they adopt to be as welcoming to members and visitors as possible. As we wait for more re-sourcing from the county, here are a few examples of how churches have put a vaccine mandate into effect in two cities that already have a similar public health order in place.

- NYC: St Luke in the Fields – [Simple Policy](#)
- San Francisco: Grace Cathedral – [Guidelines](#) – [Online Form](#)
- NYC: Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine – [Policy Update on Vaccination requirement](#)

### **If we require vaccine verification or a recent negative test, can we drop other mitigation efforts?**

No, adopting this order is not an opportunity to drop other mitigation efforts. We have learned that multiple strategies are needed, particularly as the Delta variant is more easily transmitted. Vaccine verification or negative test results (as mandated by local public health guidance) are improving efforts to limit spread of the virus and keep communities safe.

Option 1 churches and ministries in areas with vaccine/testing mandates should continue to follow the guidance offered in "[Stepping Forward Safely...](#)" which includes following any state and local public health directives. Ministries under Option 2 also must follow public health orders but do have the opportunity to adjust their other mitigation strategies within those parameters as conditions change.

### **Can we keep a list with member's vaccination status, so we don't need to see vaccination proof every week? What about HIPAA?**

Watch for further suggestions for implementation from King County before the start of this mandate. In practice, churches and other organizations with similar mandates have utilized a list for members to make it easy to attend after an initial vaccination verification. Inclusion on such a list is most often voluntary, and any ministries should treat any such list as private information used for this purpose. That said, people often misunderstand or misconstrue HIPAA and other privacy concerns. In particular, HIPAA is unlikely to apply as it governs health care providers and insurers.

### **What about outside groups that we host in our building?**

Per Section 3, Question 3 of the [King County FAQ](#), this public health order would apply to most events and activities on church property. Church leaders should make determinations about other groups they host as to whether they make a missional exception.

### **Other Resources to Review**

- Seattle & King County Public Health: [Vaccination verification for indoor activities and large outdoor events](#)
- Philadelphia Inquirer: [Can businesses require you to show your vaccine card?](#)
- Brotherhood Mutual: [Can ministries require the COVID-19 vaccine for their attendees?](#)