

## Recommendations for singing with risk mitigation

In July 2021, recognizing the importance of singing for many and the prolonged nature of this pandemic, we eased the restrictions on congregational singing in “[Stepping Forward...](#)” and provided guidance to churches and ministries in Option 2. This guidance gave local churches and ministries the option of reintroducing singing as conditions improve while maintaining an abundance of caution and love for their neighbors.

As of November 2021, the best science and expert recommendations available to the Greater Northwest Area COVID-19 Response Team continue to urge caution regarding singing, especially indoor congregational singing. **We are, though, adjusting our guidance to simplify and modestly ease our recommendations.** In doing so, we acknowledge the progress in eligibility for vaccines and boosters, their impact when implemented and promising new treatment options on the horizon.

Ministries operating under Option 1 may not engage in indoor congregational singing but are encouraged to [explore the requirements of Option 2](#) if they wish to do so when conditions allow for it in their county.

While ‘safe’ is a word many are rightfully reluctant to use amid a pandemic, we believe the following guidance remains both cautious and reflective of our Wesleyan desire to do no harm. Even as we deliver this update, we continue to be troubled by the selfish, self-destructive lack of concern among a vocal minority. That said, we understand that congregational leaders may make different decisions in defining what is ‘safe’ for their faith communities as they apply an intimate understanding of their unique context and the resources and mitigation strategies they are employing.

We remain thankful for the many clergy and lay leaders who continue to use creativity and hard-earned technological ability to safely meet the spiritual needs of those in their care. We are also grateful for those who remain especially attentive to community and congregational vulnerabilities leading them to choose even safer options, such as only singing outdoors or in virtual settings. Many congregations also offer creative non-singing alternatives to enable congregants to participate in sacred music.

After much discussion and consideration of options, the GNW COVID-19 Response Team settled on using the “[daily new cases per 100k](#)” metric as provided by [CovidActNow](#) as the indoor congregational singing threshold for ministries operating in Option 2. While we shouldn’t look at any metric in complete isolation, the new daily case count offers a straightforward measure for assessing community-based risk. In this update, we have aligned our guidance better with the existing risk categories that CovidActNow employs. The recommendation for outdoor congregational singing with masks and distancing remains unchanged.

For ministries using this singing guidance, we recommend checking this metric weekly to ascertain the best plan for that week’s events. We suggest choosing a day midweek and maintaining consistency as to when you check. You should expect some movement in your county’s risk level, especially as communities are impacted by future variants which expose new vulnerabilities.

County-based CovidActNow data remains available to view, along with our updated recommendations on the [Greater Northwest Area website](#). Select your county, and updated guidance on singing will appear in addition to other metrics.

The following recommendation, applicable only to Option 2 churches, may be adjusted again in the future as we learn more about the impact of COVID-19 variants and the resiliency of communities with a high rate of vaccination.



## Recommendations for Singing Under Option 2

We intend this chart to complement the gathering guidance offered in “[Guidelines for Safe Singing](#)” and “[Changing Course as COVID-19 Cases Rise](#).” Our recommendations are based on assumptions about the ‘average’ church defined in “[Changing Course...](#)”. Please refer to those documents for additional information and explanation.

We remind you that ministries are always invited to move more cautiously. Leaders are encouraged to consult with soloists and ensemble members to plan collaboratively and creatively to honor the musical gifts people offer and hold space for those who are more vulnerable or risk-prone.

RISK LEVEL	CASES PER 100K	INDOOR GATHERINGS	OUTDOOR GATHERINGS
SEVERE	Over 75	Limited to 10 or less, with masks, social distancing, maximum 30-minute duration, minimum 60 minutes between gatherings.  No ensemble or congregational singing. Soloists and ensembles can gather to record music.	Gatherings with masks and social distancing, maximum 60-minute duration, minimum 30 minutes between gatherings.  Congregational singing is allowed with social distancing between households and everyone masked.
VERY HIGH	25-75	Gatherings limited to 25 people, with masks and social distancing, maximum 30-minute duration, minimum of 60 minutes between gatherings.  No congregational singing. Ensembles may sing during worship with singers vaccinated and masked. <sup>1</sup>	Gatherings with masks and social distancing, no time limit.  Congregational singing with social distancing between households and everyone masked.
ORANGE	10-25	Gatherings limited to 50 people with masks and social distancing, no time limit.  No congregational singing. Ensembles may sing with singers vaccinated and masked. <sup>1</sup>	Gatherings with masks, no time limit.  Congregational singing with social distancing between households and everyone masked.
MEDIUM	1-10	Gatherings, with masks, no time limit. If singing, continue to practice social distancing.  Congregational, solo and ensemble singing with masks and other mitigation strategies.	Gatherings, with masks optional (except where required by state/local authorities), but strongly encouraged, especially for singing, no time limit.  Congregational singing with distancing between households and masks encouraged.
LOW	Under 1	Indoors, masks are optional (except where required by state/local authorities) but strongly encouraged, especially for singing.  Ministries can engage in congregational singing with no limitations.	Outdoor settings are always preferred when practical, masks optional.  Congregational singing is allowed, no masks or distance required.

<sup>1</sup> If mitigation efforts are rigorously followed, we believe that singing by a small number of vaccinated individuals does not represent a significant increase in risk. An example of this is an ensemble—a small, predetermined group of singers who agree in advance to safety measures (such as disclosing vaccination status and/or testing) and may be held accountable for these safety practices. This is very different from inviting a small congregation (with the potential for guests and no pre-planning) to sing.

## Risk Mitigation

While it may be tempting to look at risk mitigation strategies as a buffet of choices, a growing understanding of COVID-19 and how it spreads tells us that these practices are not equal in impact and are most impactful when practiced in unison. Be cautious about overreliance on any single layer of mitigation and instead utilize as many mitigation layers as possible.

Except for the Low Risk (Green) category, we expect risk mitigation beyond that specified by the CDC to be in place whenever there is singing. Even in Low Risk, we expect ministries to follow guidance from the CDC and local and state public health authorities.

When we discuss risk mitigation, we are referring to the following strategies:

- **Vaccination** – Experts tell us that vaccination is a critical tool to minimize the risk of infection and reduce the chance of severe illness. Confirming the vaccination status of worship leadership (pastor, liturgists) and musicians, particularly vocalists, is a valuable risk mitigation strategy. Especially if any of the aforementioned remove their masks during worship, vaccination should be a requirement. With all adults now eligible, booster doses are strongly recommended for vaccinated persons as they have been shown to strengthen protection against infection and severe disease.
- **Masking** – Especially with congregational singing, we recommend that 100% of the congregation wears masks regardless of vaccination status until daily new cases drop below 1 in 100k. Masking is one of the most effective methods at our disposal.
- **Distancing** – Six feet of physical distance between family groups. For those utilizing soloists and ensemble groups, use further distancing of at least 12 radial feet between each musician and congregants.
- **Testing** – In some situations, testing can provide an additional layer of mitigation. COVID-19 tests differ in the length of time required for results and the accuracy they provide. [Click here to learn more about testing options](#) so you can make an informed decision about this option.
- **Duration** – Except when ‘Green,’ and acceptable in the chart above, schedule no more than ten minutes of congregational singing per indoor service and weigh its placement toward the end of the order of worship. Plan for the total time in the space to be no longer than one hour, preferably 45 minutes or less.
- **Capacity** – Ministries should limit the capacity of activities they host based upon the risk category they are in and the size of the venue. [Please refer to our previous guidance](#) for capacity recommendations for the ‘average’ church.
- **Air Changes** – No two spaces are alike, but larger areas are better than smaller ones. Open doors and windows to the outside and recirculating air through a system with a filter with a MERV rating of 13 or higher can help, but it is best to consult with an HVAC professional to assess your space and options. For more information on ventilation, [read this Q&A we prepared](#).
- **Surface Cleaning and Personal Hygiene** – Remaining attentive to cleaning high-touch surfaces and encouraging strong personal hygiene are good risk mitigation practices to maintain. Understanding as we do now that COVID-19 is primarily transmitted through airborne particles, ministries should not believe these are effective in isolation or instead of risk mitigation efforts like vaccination, masking and attention to air circulation.

