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COVID-19: A Rapidly Changing Landscape

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ARKANSAS CONFERENCE

The last several weeks have seen a rise in COVID-19 cases in many communities in Arkansas. During the last two days, the number of reported and active cases, hospitalizations and deaths have dramatically increased. This new and dangerous landscape is the result of the Delta variant present in our communities, vaccines possibly being less effective and the fact that the number of people fully vaccinated against COVID-19 has plateaued at an alarmingly low rate.

I have worked closely with the Bishop's COVID-19 Task Force to develop the latest guidance as your Boards of Trustees use the ARUMC dashboard, CDC guidelines and information about the vaccination rate in your congregation to make decisions about how best to keep those in your church safe. While none of us like having to remain vigilant after having such high hopes about the vaccine allowing life to return to normal, we must deal with reality the way it is and not the way we wish it were.

1. Utilize the ARUMC COVID-19 dashboard.

- Check the county-focused dashboard that now contains vaccine data and may be found here: <https://arumc.org/covid19/dashboard/>

- Be aware that the benchmarks do not account for the vaccine data, nor do they distinguish between non-vaccinated cases or vaccinated cases.
- Consider collecting self-reported vaccine data from individuals in your ministry setting without asking any questions other than “Have you been vaccinated for the COVID-19 virus?” This may help you better understand how many of the people attending events at your church are vaccinated.

2. Continue to follow the safety guidelines set forth by the CDC.

- Access the CDC links on the ARUMC website that are updated weekly and may be found here: <https://arumc.org/covid19/>
- Strongly recommend, or perhaps even mandate, that those not vaccinated wear masks and socially distance by at least 6 feet.
- Move events outside if members of your congregation test COVID positive.

3. Act to keep our children safe. Since they cannot receive a vaccine yet, children under age 12 should be considered high-risk for contracting COVID-19.

- Create a ‘cocoon of safety’ by asking everyone – vaccinated and unvaccinated – to wear masks at church.
- Encourage all individuals in your community who qualify to get fully vaccinated since this provides the best way to keep our children safe.
- Follow the safety guidelines for children’s ministries may be found here: <https://arumc.org/covid19/safe-church-reopening-guidance/ministries-with-children/>

4. Think ahead.

- Prepare for flu season by continuing to sanitize hard surfaces, offering hand sanitizing stations, limiting shared surfaces, and offering only pre-packaged foods.
- Help people understand that there is a possibility for vaccinated individuals to require a booster dose of their vaccine later this year.

We do not wish to alarm you, but we believe that churches need to take the lead in keeping people in our congregations and communities safe. Just yesterday, an Arkansas United Methodist Church learned that 4 fully vaccinated members wearing masks who attended worship last Sunday have been diagnosed with COVID.

We are grateful for how Arkansas United Methodists have led the way in responsibly addressing the COVID crisis the past 18 months. It is time for us once again to step forward and make a positive difference in our congregations, communities and state as we proactively address the rapidly changing COVID landscape by getting vaccinated, socially

distancing and wearing masks. We join you as you pray for each other and care for each other.

**This statement has been compiled and shared by Bishop Gary Mueller
and the Bishop's COVID-19 Task Force**

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Amy Ezell at amy.ezell@arumc.org.

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