



Dear Northern Great Lakes Synod,

As our Synod Assembly week draws to a close, we have new information to consider regarding CDC guidelines and government orders that lift a mask mandate for all those who have been vaccinated. And once again we ask the good Lutheran question, “What does this mean?” especially for our congregations as together we consider what is safe for gathering.

I’ll begin by pointing out the difficulties:

1. To remove the masks of only the vaccinated sets up an “us” verse “them” division in our congregation communities.
2. To limit worship and gathering only to those who are vaccinated excludes anyone under the age of 12 and those who cannot medically receive the vaccine. It makes gathering a point of privilege rather than “All are Welcome.”
3. While we have smaller congregations where everyone knows that everyone else has been vaccinated, this still presents a problem for the unexpected visitor whose medical history is not so well known. Will you insist they remain masked while everyone else is not? Will they be encouraged to remove their mask even if they may not be feeling very well that day? Will they be asked to produce their vaccination card and thereby gain entrance into worship? Is that really the welcome we want to offer and what we want to be doing? What will be the strategy?
4. And it is worth noting that we are still in a pandemic. The virus is still with us. We still need to be vigilant.

So how do we continue to gather safely without creating division or shaming or excluding those who for whatever reason cannot or will not receive the vaccine?

I suggest:

- We, that is everyone, vaccinated and unvaccinated alike, continue to wear our masks in worship in indoor spaces until the vaccination rate is higher and the positivity test rate for Covid is lower in our NGLS communities.
- While singing is a higher risk activity, singing softly with masks on has been shown to significantly reduce the risk of virus spread. Congregations must do what they feel is best, but as I am aware that some of our congregations are singing softly with masks on, and none of them have been the source of a Covid outbreak, I will dare to suggest that soft singing with masks on and physically distant is an option.

Jesus proclaimed that we be unified in our faith, in our call, and in our witness. The Christian faith is one that first considers the least. While I understand a certain strategy and incentive to remove a mask mandate in order to encourage vaccination, we have seen the politicization of

masks, and the possibility exists that an unvaccinated person will choose also not to wear a mask, thereby putting any assembly at higher risk.

The Wisconsin Council of Churches also offers a response. I invite you to check out their [guidelines here](#).

From the WCC I highlight the rule of thumb to maintain two of the three: Physical distancing, Mask, Outdoor gathering.

In our year of Hope, I hope we can agree to keep our masks on in indoor worship, for the time being. I hope to sing softly with your congregation in worship sometime soon. I hope that the renewal of the earth and its greening will renew your spirits that I know must feel weary of all of this.

Hang on a little longer and wear the mask for yourself and others a little longer. We can do this.

Yours in Christ,
Rev. Katherine Finegan
Bishop of the Northern Great Lakes Synod