

Technical Assistance Manual (T.A.M.) - Phase Three

Moving Forward in Pandemic Ministry

How do we plan worship and ministry in a time of pandemic? The Virginia Annual Conference has developed a number of resources through the course of the COVID-19 crisis. The primary resource for worship during this period was the Technical Assistance Manual (TAM) which continues to be a reference tool for congregations. Local churches have worked diligently during this season to continue “being the church” while implementing the protocol outlined in the TAM.

The TAM came to emphasize six mitigation factors that have proven successful in limiting the risk of virus spread: **hygiene, physical distancing, masks, screening, limiting exposure, and ventilation.** Even though we know that the pandemic is not over, the availability and effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccines is greatly reducing the risk of virus spread throughout our communities. Pandemic restrictions continue to be relaxed nationwide and we give thanks for these hopeful signs. However, we all want to do our part in helping to contain the spread of the virus and to practice responsible mitigation measures in our churches by following the best guidance available to us:

[Interim Public Health Recommendations for Fully Vaccinated People](#)
[SEVENTH AMENDED NUMBER SEVENTY-TWO \(2021\) AND ORDER OF PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY NINE FURTHER EASING OF COMMONSENSE SURGE RESTRICT](#)

On May 15, our Bishop, Cabinet and Conference Post-COVID Re-entry Group (PRG) issued a response to Governor Northam’s easing of COVID-19 restrictions that took effect at midnight on that same day. ([Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church Response to Updated Governor's Order](#)). While the Conference encourages churches to use discernment, continued vigilance and a cautious process in easing any mitigation measures currently in place, churches were given the opportunity to take immediate steps, as guided by their Healthy Church Team (HCT) and with the pastor’s approval. Those steps are:

1. Fully vaccinated leaders may preach without a mask ([click here](#))
2. Fully vaccinated persons may be unmasked in indoor and outdoor settings
3. Fully vaccinated persons may sing without a mask in indoor and outdoor settings
4. Eating outdoors may occur with individually packed meals

Physical distancing and capacity requirements are still in place at this time. Churches should keep in mind that Executive Order 72 (above) is still in effect, and more changes are coming for the Commonwealth on May 28, when Executive Order 79 will take effect [ATTENTION: This Order is not effective until midnight on May 28, 2021. NUMBER SEVENTY-NINE \(2021\) AND ORDER OF PUBLIC HEALTH EME.](#)

Churches are encouraged to activate their local PRGs as soon as possible, and to begin using the attached M.A.P. in developing their own timeline and ministry plans moving forward, based on current guidance. By definition, a map helps us chart our course and gives us direction for finding our way toward our destination. The M.A.P. provides flexibility to each local setting, while continuing to emphasize the importance of common sense mitigation. The M.A.P. is not intended to provide a detailed protocol for all the various scenarios or activities that take place in the local church. Local church PRGs now have the freedom to access and interpret the current guidance from the CDC and State of Virginia for themselves, and determine how and when to implement changes to current plans, depending on the local context. Churches that are continuing to use the same TAM plans previously developed and approved by your District Superintendent do not need to submit new plans for those activities at this time. The M.A.P. should be used by local church PRGs to:

1. Work through changes to your current practice moving forward, including a timeline of when any new practices will be implemented in your church
2. Restart ministries or activities that have not been relaunched in your church
3. Initiate new ministries
4. Communicate recent changes you have already made in your mitigation practices based on the new guidance issued by the Conference on May 15. While some churches may have already moved forward and implemented these changes immediately, the Conference asks that local PRGs still submit those changes using the M.A.P. to your District Superintendent for review. Churches/PRGs that wish to ease their mitigation measures **beyond the above allowances** should plan to implement those measures after **May 28, 2021**, after submitting them to your District Superintendent for review.

The M.A.P. process offers suggested recommendations for each mitigation factor for churches to consider when developing plans. Guidance continues to evolve and will need revision as we progress. We also understand that the current guidance makes a clear distinction between fully vaccinated and unvaccinated persons with regard to mask wearing, social distancing and the overall safety of participating in various activities around other people. In the church setting, and especially in corporate worship, we encourage the full participation of all persons, including the unvaccinated. Therefore, we encourage observance of practices that will best protect the unvaccinated as we make every effort to “love our neighbor” and “do no harm.” The attached B.R.A.I.N. decision-making model is offered to local PRGs to assist you in making these important and challenging decisions for your church moving forward.

Any easing of local church mitigation measures or new ministry plans should include basic information about appropriate signage, how new practices will be communicated to the congregation so participants can make informed decisions, and when these plans will be implemented by the local church. Gathering input from the congregation may help church teams in their decision-making process. Church teams that are exploring or have already implemented a relaxation of current mitigation measures will want to reference the current PCR positivity rates in your locality available from the Virginia Department of Health [COVID-19 in Virginia: PCR Test Positivity Rates – Coronavirus](#)).

If at any time, the Commonwealth begins to experience a resurgence of COVID-19 or its variants, the Bishop and Cabinet retain the discretion to reinstate previously employed mitigation measures. For the latest news and updates from the Conference, including helpful information on forming local PRGs and FAQs, please visit [Post-COVID Re-entry Group \(PRG\)](#)

Please submit all new plans or changes to your mitigation measures to your District Superintendent for review.

M.A.P. (Mitigation Assistance Plan)

May 18, 2021

Our Gathering

Name of Worship service, ministry event, or church activity:

Date this plan will be implemented: _____

1. HYGIENE Minimum Standards: Encourage and provide for frequent hand hygiene (hand washing, sanitizer and helpful signage); continue to sanitize high-touch areas, especially with consecutive worship services/activities in the same space. (<https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/when-how-handwashing.html>).

We will provide for this by:

2. PHYSICAL DISTANCING Minimum Standards: Proper physical distancing (recommended at least 6 feet) for indoors and outdoors, especially in public and congregant settings;

<https://www.governor.virginia.gov/media/governorvirginiagov/governor-of-virginia/pdf/May-15-2021-Forward-Virginia-Guidelines.pdf>

We will provide for this by:

3. MASKS Suggested Recommendations/Considerations: Masks are no longer required for fully vaccinated persons indoors or outdoors. Masks are still advised when physical distancing cannot be maintained or in congregant settings where persons from multiple households are gathered. Congregations that are considering unmasking indoors may want to consider those in their church family who are not yet vaccinated, including youth and children, and guests or others in attendance whose vaccination status may be unknown.

We will provide for this by implementing the following plan:

4. SCREENING Minimum Standards: Stay home when sick; self-check in at door with health acknowledgement poster.

<https://doc.vaumc.org/Return/HealthAcknowledgementPoster.pdf>

We will provide for this by:

5. LIMIT EXPOSURE Suggested recommendations/Considerations:
Churches should try to gather outdoors whenever possible. When gathering indoors consider:

- a. the total amount of time where groups are gathered indoors in any one gathering space;
- b. the number of people gathered in one space. Please choose larger spaces over smaller ones for all indoor gatherings. Well-fitting masks should be worn and proper physical distancing is recommended.

We will provide for this by:

6. VENTILATION Suggested recommendations/Considerations: Maximize airflow and turnover of air in the occupied space: 6 exchanges per hour is recommended; prioritize outdoor activities whenever possible

<https://doc.vaumc.org/News2020/Ventilationrecommendations.pdf>

We will provide for this by:

**Please submit the plan for District Superintendent's review.
Contact the District office for more information on how to submit the plan.**

Think it through using B.R.A.I.N.*
A Suggested Decision-Making Model for Local Church Teams
**Developed as a collaborative work by various groups, including Patient Voices Network*

We offer the following model as a tool for local church PRGs. It offers a possible group process that might be helpful to you when applying current mitigation guidance in your local setting and in making important decisions in your church moving forward.



- B** **BENEFITS**
What are the benefits of this decision?
How might this positively impact the church and guests?
- R** **RISKS**
What are the risks of this decision? How might this negatively impact the church and community?
- A** **ALTERNATIVES**
What are the alternatives to this decision?
Are there any other options?
- I** **INTUITION**
What are our hearts telling us? In what direction is the Holy Spirit leading us in this decision?
- N** **NEED MORE TIME/ NOTHING**
Do we need more time to think this through?
What happens if we do nothing?

*Developed as a collaborated work by groups, including Patient Voices Network

FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT
WWW.VAUMC.ORG/PRG