

FAQ's
Covid Vaccines and the Church
May 14, 2021

There have been many questions about how the operations of congregations change based on the availability of the COVID vaccines. Here is an outline of both legal and practical implications of the availability of vaccines.

What can congregations **legally** require?

1. Can a local church require that its attendees be vaccinated? **YES.**
2. Can a local church require all its leaders of faith formation groups to be vaccinated? **YES.**
3. Can a local church require that all individuals who attend faith formation groups, regardless of age, be vaccinated? **YES.**
4. Can a local church open up before CDC Guidelines allow? **YES.**
5. Can a local church require its pastor to attend functions in person? **NO.**
6. Can a local church require its pastor to get vaccinated? **NO.**
7. Can a pastor require their congregation to get vaccinated before providing in-person pastoral services? **YES.**

What are the **policy and practical** aspects?

- a. Overall Safety Precautions: Before requiring vaccinations, a congregation should ensure that all of its safety protocols, including masking and social distancing, are in place for safe practices and gatherings. Many congregations have already opened up for in person, face-to-face gatherings of different kinds and are effectively following all safety precautions.
- b. Waiting for Vaccinations: In an abundance of caution, before opening up any in-person, face-to-face church activities, it would be the safest practice to wait until everyone who wants a vaccine can receive them. Opening in-person, face-to-face ministries and requiring vaccination to attend creates a tiered system of those who can attend and those who are not. Going down the mandatory road may be problematic and may cause divisions between those who are vaccinated and those who choose not or cannot be vaccinated.
- c. Eligibility: At this moment, many children and youth are not eligible to receive the vaccine. The safest possible route is to postpone reopening indoor face-to-face faith formation activities. Any in person gatherings need to be evaluated for safety and have best practice safety protocol in place based on the health department recommendations for the area.
- d. CDC Guidelines: CDC guidelines are not mandated for churches. Keep in mind, the safest approach is for congregations to wait until the CDC or Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) allows gatherings in your local area before reopening/resuming activities.

- e. Pastoral/Staff Roles: As long as the CDC or MDHHS is limiting gatherings, a pastor can avoid in-person church functions for their own health or personal reasons. They do not have an obligation to disclose those reasons to the local church. Our appointed pastors are not “employees” of the local church. The Conference has the option to require its pastors to be vaccinated, but the local church does not have that option. The Conference has not adopted such a policy at this time. The local church does have the option to require its non-appointed staff to be vaccinated as a condition of employment.

- f. Pastoral Contact: Whether the pastor is providing services in the sanctuary, pastoral care in their office, or home visits to shut-ins or others, the pastor can require that the people they are encountering be vaccinated before providing those services in person. However, with proper masking and distancing, pastoral care can usually be offered safely to parishioners. Each pastor must use their own discretion to make prudent decisions about direct in person pastoral care, understanding that safety must remain a first priority.

- g. Health Exceptions: The only exception to a vaccine mandate would be those who have a substantiated medical condition or disability that disqualifies them from getting the vaccine. (A religious exemption would be difficult to substantiate in the United Methodist tradition.) If someone has a medical condition that prohibits vaccination, they should disclose it in private to one of the clergy who can then make an exception to a vaccine requirement on a case-by-case basis based on the documentation provided. Clergy confidentiality is required around disclosing the medical condition without the consent of the individual involved. Keep in mind the clergy person can revoke the exception later if it uncovered that the person fabricated a medical condition. If vaccines are not required, but only encouraged, the local church would avoid the exceptions that could otherwise complicate the re-opening of the church.

If you have questions about this, please contact your District Superintendent or someone on the Conference Staff.