

To Mask or Not to Mask? That is a question?

The CDC guidelines are created for the entire nation based on statistical information for the entire country.

The MN Health Department Guidelines and the Governor's guidelines and mandates are created for the entire state of Minnesota. The map of Minnesota as of Friday showed one county that was a low risk for Covid spread. The rest of the state falls in the rest of the range except there is currently no extreme risk.

Steele County is at very high risk (red) on the map.

How are we, as an organization and faith community, going to continue Covid-19 protocols and protections? We have the science and data to consider. We have our values of being warm and welcoming which, I believe, extend to creating as safe a place as we can for the vulnerable who might be among us.

I suggest that Associated Church continue to expect people who enter and use our facilities to wear a mask – vaccinated or not. The exception is the preschool while that population is using its space. They are following guidelines created for childcare and preschools.

I suggest that we continue to encourage physical distancing and keep alternate pews marked off.

I suggest that we move outdoors for any after worship conversation.

I suggest that we can make these changes:

- Bibles and hymnals can be returned to the holders on the pews.
- We can continue to have materials that people can pick up.
- I have asked Adult MT to make a recommendation about food and fellowship
- I have asked our music staff to make a recommendation about singing in worship
- We do not need ushers to seat people, but we do need people to welcome folk to the building and to the sanctuary.

I suggest that we follow the suggestions of the UCC Conference Minister and delay starting to pass offering plates or communion elements in the pews. Which, really, is okay because it is hard to do that when we are so scattered.

Regarding meetings and other uses of the building: I suggest that we open the building to use as much as possible as a community partner as well as a congregation. We will stress that people who are ill should stay home, people must wear masks unless medically unable to, practice physical distancing, keep up hand hygiene.

The Council will review Associated Churches protocols regarding Covid-19 safe space at each meeting.

I also suggest that these statistical markers could be used for deciding about masking and distance.

- When the vaccination rate for Steele County all people 12 and over reaches 70% as reported by the MN Department of Health, Steele County Health Department, and/or covidactnow.org – best if at least two of the three – Council may choose to lift the masking protocol.
- When the positivity rate on Covid-19 tests is 5% or lower for a minimum of a week and/or the 7-day rolling average for new cases is 5.0 or less for a minimum of a week, Council may choose to lift the making protocol.

As of Friday, May 21, the positivity rate was on the rise and is over 7%. The new case report is going down. The county is at a 7-day rolling average of 7.4 per day. The vaccination rate for those 12 and over is 45.4%

Of note: When we decided to open the building for worship and other activities in March, both the positivity rate and the new case average were below the above threshold. They have been steadily climbing since early April.