

University Presbyterian Church COVID Response Reduction Plan Draft Version 2.3 (Jan 2022)

Overview

The following is a revision of the original UPC COVID Response Reduction Plan, approved by the Session in July 2020. This revision attempts to incorporate new realities related to COVID: in particular: guidance from Austin Public Health, new information related to variant strains, and best practices in the wake of widely-available vaccination.

The UPC Mission and Vision statements, our Affirmative Inclusion Statement, and the polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) foundationally guide this plan, alongside guidance from local health authorities. At every stage, this document attempts to help UPC do the following:

- **Provide Pastoral Care to Anxious and Hungry People.** Many members of the UPC family are understandably eager to return to a busy and energetic sanctuary. Others, now acclimated to a more isolated lifestyle, are anxious about returning to a crowded or socially-demanding event. UPC seeks to offer opportunities for fellowship and worship that may feed that first hunger while also creating “baby steps” towards larger gatherings for those who may be currently overwhelmed by the thought of being surrounded by people.
- **Keep the Doors of our Worship as Open as Possible.** One of the surprising virtues of Zoom worship has been the ways in which it has accommodated the worship needs of people in multiple walks of life, allowing broad access to our current liturgy. UPC seeks to re-center worship in the sanctuary in such a way and at such a time that we may continue to offer the broadest access to the richest liturgy for the greatest possible number of people.
- **Maintain a Safe and Healthy Environment for All Participants.** Since the beginning of the pandemic, UPC has consistently prioritized the health and safety of its membership, and will continue to do so, by following best-practice guidelines for safe gatherings at every stage in accordance with both broad scientific consensus and our own adopted health and safety protocols. While our calling to Christian hospitality extends to all, we also seek to follow the example of Christ by centering our commitment to hospitality on the needs of the most vulnerable among us.

A few key logistical notes for consideration:

- Unlike RRP Version 1.0, which progressed upwards from Stage One through to Stage Four, **RRP Version 2.0 correlates intentionally with Austin Public Health advisory stages**, such that Stage 5 represents the highest possible alert category, and Stage 1 the lowest.¹ Therefore, this document

¹ Based on APH Stage guidance published December 20, 2021.

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begins at Stage 5 and proceeds downwards through an anticipated de-escalation of COVID protocols. In addition, the previous RRP v.1 utilized a system of individual pandemic metrics to indicate the potential opportunity for response de-escalation. While the use of metrics continues to be the most reliable approach to an informed pandemic response, this RRP v.2 relies upon metric data that has also been synthesized by epidemiologists and interpreted to the community by trusted local health authorities in the form of the five stage APH system. This system also comes complete with practical guidance for individual and organizational action.

- *By correlating our response stages with Austin Public Health guidance, UPC is attempting both to inhabit its responsible role as part of the broader and immediate Austin community and to simplify our own metrics and process for ease of communication and understanding.*
- As corollary to the above, in the event of additional re-escalation of APH stages, this document may and will be read backwards, necessitating additional re-escalations of UPC's protocols.
- **This RRP v.2 allows for changes in UPC's stages to be triggered automatically**, without the need for additional Session approval, by changes in APH's advisory stages. However, it may take a bit of time to transition from one stage to another: thus, as soon as APH changes its advisory stage (for example, from Stage 4 to Stage 3), UPC staff will then meet and designate an appropriate first Sunday for sanctuary worship, which is unlikely to be the immediately following Sunday.
- **For the purpose of simplicity, this document overrides all previous UPC COVID protocols.**

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APH Stage 5

At Stages 4 and 5, APH recommends vaccinated individuals to wear masks both at indoor and outdoor public gatherings, and recommends unvaccinated individuals not to attend public gatherings.

1. All public in-person services of worship are suspended. UPC continues to worship exclusively over Zoom or its equivalent online arrangement.
2. The Sacrament of Communion may be celebrated in a remote worship format and in a manner consistent with the theological and liturgical tenets of the Reformed tradition. The Sacrament of Baptism may be celebrated as approved by the Session on a case-by-case basis.
3. In-person sanctuary weddings and memorial services may be approved by the staff in accordance with existing UPC wedding and funeral policies.
4. All outside group use of the church facilities is suspended with the exception of facility use by the Micah 6 Food Pantry and its related operations.
5. Handwashing and "Cover your Cough" instruction signage are posted in public places throughout the church.
6. Hand sanitizer bottles or auto-dispense stands are available in all rooms, hallways, and at primary entrances. PPE supplies including masks, gloves, and cleaning supplies should be available to all those entering the facility.
7. Public church office hours are suspended. Members and guests may enter the church by staff appointment only and with staff present.
8. Church staff members may continue to work in their offices or from home. Staff members must wear masks when working proximate to other staff members and in high traffic areas like the main office and hallways.
9. In-person use of the church facilities may only be held in primarily outdoor spaces like the church courtyard, and subject to the following conditions:
 - a. All in-person events are subject to staff availability and approval.
 - b. No in-person events shall be scheduled which, in pre-COVID circumstances, would have reasonably anticipated the participation of children below the age threshold for vaccination eligibility.
 - c. **All attendees at in-person events are expected to have been vaccinated, if eligible, in compliance with APH guidelines.**
 - i. Vaccination is the key means by which UPC may offer events in compliance with APH recommendations.

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- ii. In addition, vaccination is a freely-available way by which UPC may participate in loving our neighbors.
 - iii. For the purposes of this policy, UPC understands “vaccinated” to describe anyone who has had two shots of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine, or one shot of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, in addition to any requisite waiting period.
 - iv. UPC cannot reasonably check vaccination records at the door of every event, but nonetheless expects participants and event organizers to take this policy seriously.
 - v. The UPC Staff may grant exceptions to this vaccination policy on a case-by-case basis.
- d. Mask-wearing will be required of all participants over the age of two, at in-person non-worship gatherings at all times.
 - e. All in-person events are expected to observe and follow appropriate social distancing guidelines in accordance with APH recommendations.
 - f. Anyone experiencing cold- or flu-like symptoms is strongly encouraged not to attend any in-person event.

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APH Stage 4

All protocols outlined in APH Stage 5 continue, with the following changes:

1. In-person use of indoor church facilities, including public worship, may resume, under the following conditions:
 - a. All vaccination and masking requirements from Stage 5 continue.
 - b. Worship attendees are expected to follow appropriate social distancing guidelines in accordance with APH recommendations. Some sanctuary accommodations may be taken to help enforce appropriate distancing.
 - c. Hospitality and PPE supplies, including hand sanitizer and masks, will be provided.
 - d. UPC will provide attendees with as many ways as possible of showing their degree of comfort with physical distance and touch.
 - e. Accommodations will be taken in worship to minimize opportunities for surface disease transmission. This may include alternate means of collecting a physical offering; restricted access to physical hymnals, pew bibles, and friendship registers; and, accommodated access to the sacraments. Access to the sacraments will be made possible for all attendees regardless of varying degrees of comfort with physical touch and distance.
 - f. Some parts of the narthex may be reserved as child-safe space during the time of worship. Children will not be gathered as a group to the front of the Sanctuary for the Time with the Younger Church.
 - g. Congregational singing is permitted subject to the mask-wearing requirement outlined above. Small musical ensembles (eight or fewer people) are permitted to rehearse and/or perform in worship, as long as space permits them to adequately physically distance during performance, and subject to the vaccination and mask-wearing requirements outlined above.
 - h. Worship leadership will be exempt from the above mask requirement only while speaking in the liturgy, preaching, directing musical ensembles, or playing organ or piano. A mask will be worn by the presiding liturgist during the baptism of an infant or child under the age threshold of vaccine eligibility.
2. Additional conditions for worship may be enacted in order to help UPC fully comply with APH guidance and recommendations.

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3. Greeting and pastoral presence after worship will be located in the central courtyard to facilitate quick and easy movement of attendees out of the sanctuary. Other restrictions on elevator use, restroom occupancy, or single-direction door and stairwell use may remain intact at the discretion of the staff.
4. UPC will continue to provide access to its sanctuary worship to remote attendees via streaming technology, subject to the availability of adequate staffing resources. Specific streaming technologies may change over time to reflect the ongoing needs of the congregation.

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APH Stage 3

At Stage 3, APH recommends vaccinated individuals wear masks at indoor gatherings, and recommends unvaccinated individuals to wear masks at public gatherings whether indoors or outdoors.

All protocols outlined in APH Stage 4 continue, with the following changes:

1. Vaccination will continue to be highly recommended for participation in church events, but, in accordance with APH guidelines, will not be required.
2. The mask-wearing requirement remains in effect for all persons over the age of two (2) years of age while indoors, regardless of vaccination status. While outdoors, the mask-wearing requirement is lifted for vaccinated individuals, in accordance with APH guidance.
3. Size restrictions for musical ensembles are lifted, both for rehearsal and in-worship.

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APH Stages 1 and 2

At Stages 1 and 2, APH permits low-risk vaccinated individuals to remove their masks in both indoor and outdoor gatherings, while high-risk individuals are to remain masked for indoor gatherings.

1. The mask-wearing requirement is suspended for vaccinated participants at church events and worship services. Unvaccinated participants over the age of two (2) are expected to continue to wear a mask in accordance with APH guidelines and are encouraged to sit at a distance from the chancel area during worship.
2. Public worship may continue under the conditions outlined in Stage 4, with the following changes:
 - a. Physical distancing expectations are suspended for vaccinated worship attendees. Some sections of the sanctuary may be reserved for those seeking intentionally physically-distanced seating, especially for families with children.
 - b. Accommodations related to physical touch may be eased, including resumed access to hymnals, bibles, friendship registers, and pew materials. UPC will continue to provide accommodated access to sacraments and offering for all attendees regardless of comfort with physical touch.
 - c. Additional conditions for worship may be eased subject to APH guidance and recommendations.
3. The nursery may be reopened subject to the availability of adequate staffing resources and strict compliance with health and safety protocols.
4. The UPC Office may reopen for public access subject to staff and volunteer resources.
5. UPC Staff may resume accepting requests for outside group use of the church facility, including overnight use, subject to the availability of adequate staffing resources, and to the ability of outside groups to fully accept responsibility for the sanitizing of any spaces they occupy.

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Post-Pandemic APH Staging

To be activated whenever APH discontinues its pandemic response staging, suspending mask recommendations for unvaccinated persons.

1. All UPC mask-wearing requirements are suspended.
2. All other pandemic-related protocols may be suspended.
3. UPC will continue to maintain standard illness prevention procedures.