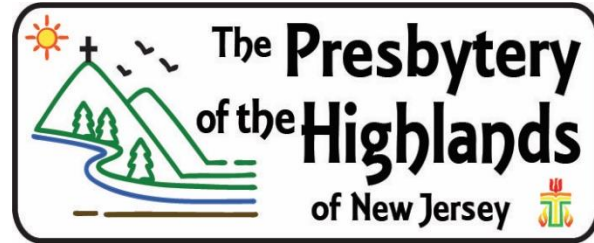


We were all hopeful that by summer we would be seeing the back end of the COVID virus. That was not to be. We find ourselves this winter amid another surge led by the Omicron Variant. Even though there are reports that this variant is not as “deadly” as previous variants, it still brings on serious illness and death, especially to those who are not vaccinated or have underlying conditions. The long-term effects of this variant are unknown. We strongly recommend that you take this as seriously as previous variants.



That said, this is not March 2020. We do have more tools and experience in managing exposure to the virus such as masking, social distancing, virtual gatherings, digital technology, and vaccinations. We recommend you use all those tools to assist you as you continue your worship and ministry.

Over the last few weeks, the following questions have been asked in various ways. The Property and Insurance team, tasked with keeping track of COVID protocols, offers the following as recommendations, guidance and responses to your questions.

Question and Answers concerning the Omicron Variant and Church life.

Should we suspend in person worship/gatherings/meetings?

There are many contributing factors to this question. First, if your county is Red or Magenta (Covidactnow.com) or if the county positivity rate is above 15%, you should consider suspending in person gatherings and programs. (i.e., coffee hour, fellowship, etc.) Worship should be suspended if you are unable to social distance and wear masks safely and/or have a cluster of members test positive for the virus. Have plans ready to go for online alternates for meetings and gatherings.

What about if we wear masks and social distance?

If you are meeting in person, Mask Wearing must be mandatory for all in people at the meeting or gathering. The CDC and NJ Department of Health recommend that people upgrade for single layer of cloth to at least the minimum of two layers and a surgical mask or a N95 or KN95 mask.

Social distancing must also be mandatory while in the building or sanctuary. If your sanctuary is not large enough to keep social distance of 6 feet than you should consider going to online or virtual worship.

What about singing?

Because of the extremely contagious nature of the Omicron Variant all singing, including choirs, should be suspended until the positivity rate in your area is below 15%.

What should we do next?

Your next steps is for the session to approve the protocols for this next season of the pandemic and communicate them with the congregation.

What do we do if someone tests positive and was in worship or another gathering?

- Send a communication to all who may have attended the gathering/worship service. In the case of a worship service, the letter should go to the entire congregation.
- Encourage all who attended to get tested as soon as possible whether they have been vaccinated and/or masked at the time of gathering. Vaccinated people can contract the virus and may spread it to others unknowingly.
- Anyone who comes back with a positive test should contact the church office and should isolate according to their doctor's recommendations.
- Plan for online worship or gatherings should there appear to be a cluster of cases from this incident.
- Have a plan should the COVID positive person (s) are the worship leaders.

What should you include in your communications?

- First find out from the person informing you of their positive test if you can use their name (s). This might be helpful for people to know how close and maybe exposed they were.
- If it was a small group send out an email to everyone who participated with specific information followed by an email to larger congregation informing them that someone at a small group tested positive.
- If it was a large group, like the worship service, send an email to the whole congregation with as much detail information as possible.
- Encourage all participants of whatever event to get tested and to quarantine until they are tested.
- Keep the communication focused on care for the people and not on blaming anyone or any one group.

How do we know the Positivity Rates for our County?

COVID ACT NOW (covidactnow.org) is the best resource to find out the positivity rate for your county on a daily basis. The information is based on the previous day's testing results.

What is the “Percent Positive” or “Positivity Rate” and why does it matter?
(from John Hopkins: Bloomberg School of Public Health)

The percent positive is exactly what it sounds like: the percentage of all coronavirus tests performed that are actually positive, or: $(\text{positive tests})/(\text{total tests}) \times 100\%$. The percent positive (sometimes called the “percent positive rate” or “positivity rate”) helps public health officials answer questions such as:

- What is the current level of SARS-CoV-2 (coronavirus) transmission in the community?
- Are we doing enough testing for the amount of people who are getting infected?

The percent positive will be high if the number of *positive tests* is too high, or if the number of *total tests* is too low. A higher percent positive suggests higher transmission and that there are likely more people with coronavirus in the community who haven’t been tested yet.

The percent positive is a critical measure because it gives us an indication how widespread infection is in the area where the testing is occurring—and whether levels of testing are keeping up with levels of disease transmission.

The Positivity Rates for COVID in the Presbyteries Counties
(as of January 7, 2022)

Sussex County – Severe Risk Level – 34.3 %

Passaic County – Severe Risk Level – 40.6%

Morris County – Severe Risk Level – 33.6%

Warren County – Severe Risk Level – 36.7%

Somerset County – Severe Risk Level – 35.6%

Hunterdon County – Severe Risk Level – 33.4%

Mercer County – Severe Risk Level – 27.9%