



## **Covid Safety Measures in The Episcopal Church: An Analysis of the 2021 Parochial Report Qualitative Questions**

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In 2021, congregations in The Episcopal Church continued to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic which began in early 2020. Congregations implemented a variety of safety measures and looked to several different sources when deciding when and how they should hold in-person worship services in 2021.

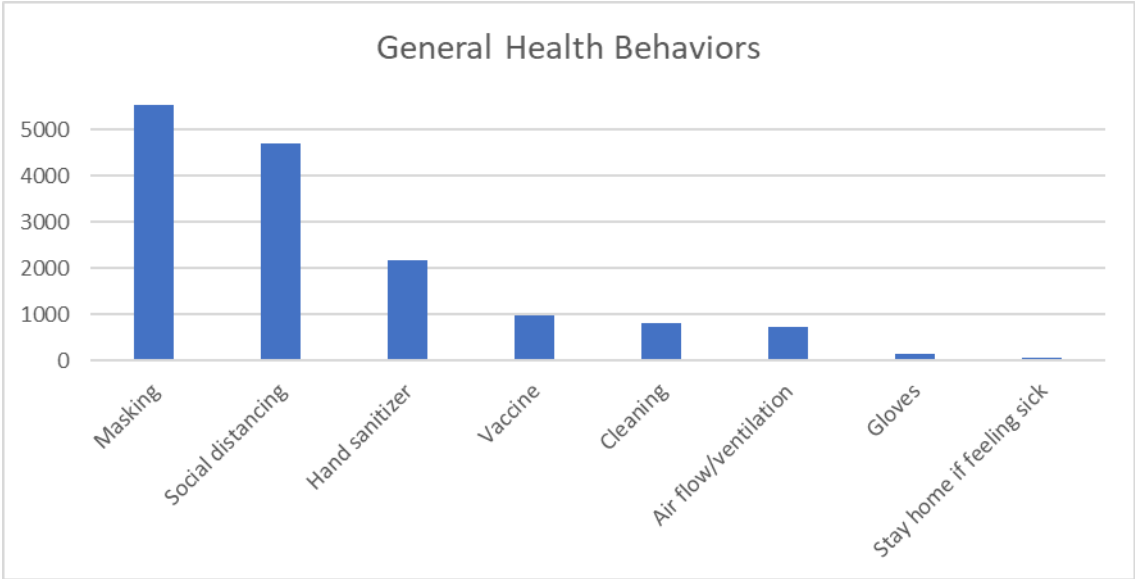
This report summarizes some of the most common protocols used by congregations.

### Safety Protocols Implemented

A total of 5,600 congregations provided specifics when asked the question “What COVID safety measures, if any, were used in attending in-person worship (masks, vaccination requirement, etc.).<sup>1</sup>” These congregations provided a wide variety of responses which can be grouped into three main categories: general health behaviors, changes to the content of the service, and changes to the procedure of the services.

#### General Health Behaviors

The first kind of responses relate to general health behaviors. This includes wearing masks, observing social distancing, providing hand sanitizing stations, cleaning the building, upgrading ventilation and air filters, asking people who feel sick to stay home, wearing gloves, and encouraging those who were eligible to receive the vaccine.



Over 98% of congregations who provided specifics about their covid protocols mentioned face masks. This ranged from requiring masks to be worn at all times, to recommending or encouraging them, to allowing people to use their discretion about masking. Many congregations reported changes in their protocols over the course of the year, including relaxing masking at certain instances based on local infection rates.

<sup>1</sup> Another 117 congregations responded to the question but did not provide specific measures. Most of these congregations said they followed the guidelines set by their diocese, county, and/or state.

Additionally, 84% of congregations who provided specifics mentioned social distancing. This was done by spreading people out in the worship space, marking off every other pew, or removing seating. Several congregations did allow for worshipers to sit in family groups.

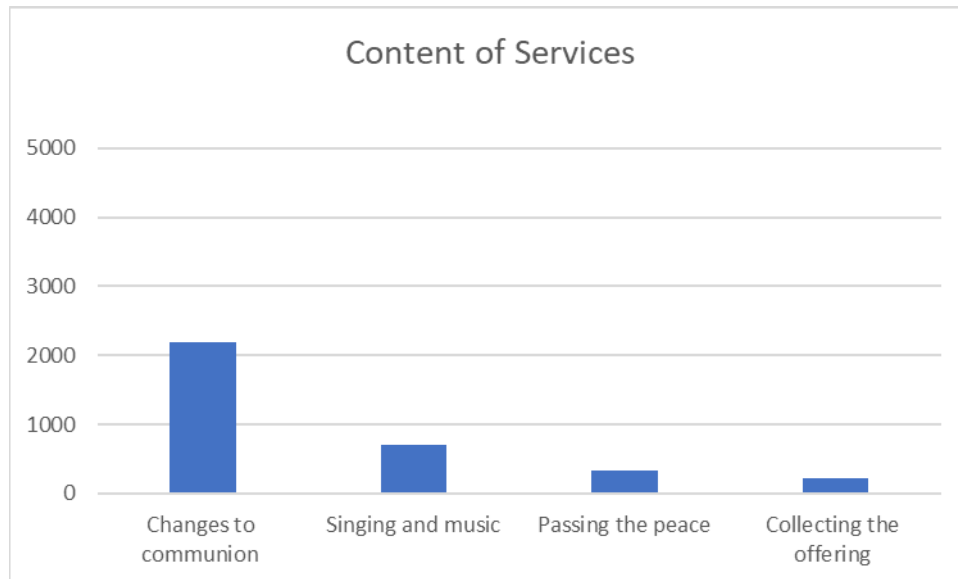
About 4 in 10 congregations mentioned the use of hand sanitizers. Many had stations set up around the building and sanctuary for people to use before worship and especially before receiving the eucharist. Several congregations also had their leaders wash or sanitize their hands before serving the Eucharist. About 2% of congregations mentioned the wearing of gloves when serving the Eucharist.

About 17% mentioned the vaccine. This included some congregations who required it as well as others who just encouraged it. Further, some required the vaccine of all people whereas some only mandated that their staff or people in leadership roles get it. Some congregations used the ability of the vaccine as a marker of when they could change their protocols and ease restrictions. Several congregations discussed having different restrictions for participants who are fully vaccinated versus those who are not.

14% of congregations discussed increased cleaning of the building, 13% referenced upgrading air filtration or leaving a door or window open for ventilation, and only 1% talked about having people stay home if they are feeling sick. Other measures mentioned were requiring testing of worship leaders, providing Covid test kits at the church, not allowing any hugging, handshaking, or touching of any kind, and posting signage to remind people of the protocols.

### *Content of Services*

The second category of safety measures relates to changes in the content of worship services. This includes eliminating or modifying singing, restricting the passing of the peace, stopping passing offering plates, and making several adaptations to the Eucharist.



12% of congregations who provided specifics about their covid protocols mentioned a change to the music in a service. Many congregations did not allow singing when they first returned to in-person worship. Some allowed a soloist or small choir while others used only instrumental music or

prerecorded hymns. Some congregations sang fewer verses of hymns instead of the full version. As the year progressed, several congregations lessened their restriction on singing to allow singing with masks on or fully back to their original way of worshiping with music.

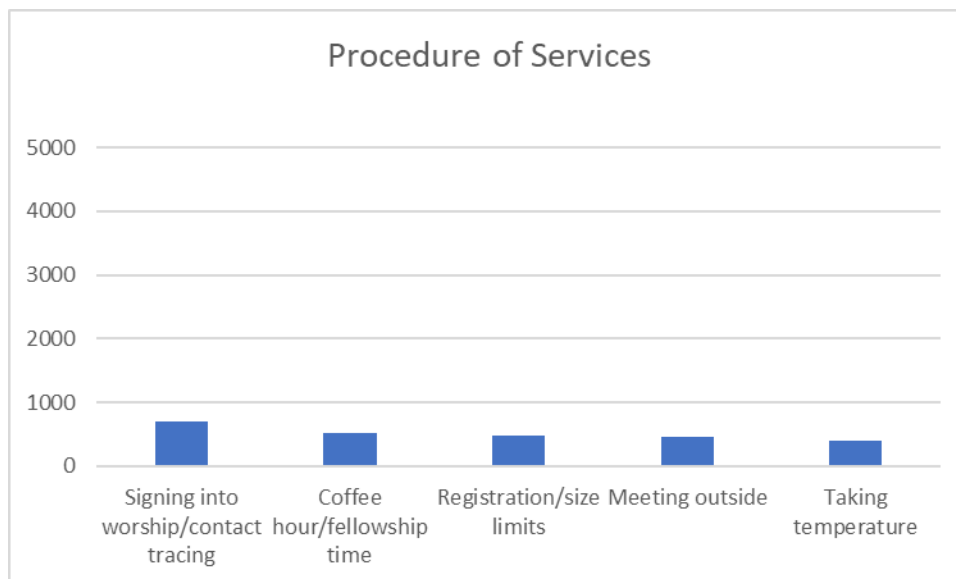
About 4% of congregations mentioned not passing an offering plate and instead using a stationary collection plate or, in a few cases, only online giving. Similarly, the passing of the peace was impacted for about 6% of responding congregations. Many congregations indicated that they eliminated the passing of the peace or modified it to be a stationary process using waves, bows, or, in one case, pool noodles to greet one another.

Changes to the Eucharist was one of the most commonly named adaptations, third only to masking and social distancing. About 40% of responding congregations reported a change to how they performed this sacrament. Some congregations just altered the movement aspect and had congregants remain in their pews while others changed what elements were served. A common modification was to offer communion in one kind only and provide communicants with just a wafer and no wine. In most of these cases, the wine was consumed by the leader on behalf of everyone present. Some congregations used prepackaged communion elements, and some used a wafer that was infused with wine. Most did not initially use the common cup but by the end of the year, several congregations did allow for intinction. If a congregation celebrated Communion by intinction, the wafer was often dipped into the wine by the celebrant for the receiver. Congregations also discussed having the leader visibly wash or sanitizer their hands before celebrating communion.

Interestingly, only a total of 19 congregations referenced making changes to the baptism sacrament. Further, most of these references were about removing holy water from the font.

### *Procedure of the services*

The final category of safety measures is modifications to the procedures of worship. This includes measures such as having people sign in when they arrive to a service, contact tracing, requiring advanced registration or restricting the number of people allowed to attend an in-person service, taking temperatures, meeting outside if possible, and foregoing a coffee hour or fellowship time.



About 12% of responding congregations kept attendance records at services, often for contact tracing purposes. Only about 9% had advanced registration required or capacity restrictions. 7% asked participants to take their temperature upon arriving to the service. These measures were more common earlier in the year but tended to fall away as time went on.

9% of congregations specifically mentioned not having a coffee hour or fellowship time before or after a service. Those that did, often held it outside and provided prepackaged food. About 8% talked about having services or fellowship time outside at some point during the year.

Other frequently mentioned measures were shortening the length of the service, limiting mobility during the service by eliminating processions and other movement about the sanctuary, removing hymnals and the Book of Common Prayer and instead using paper bulletins or projection, adding more services, and continuing to provide some form of virtual worship.

### *None of the Above*

A total of 35 congregations answered the question by indicated that they had implemented no safety measures. A third of these congregations indicated that this response was because they remained 100% virtual and did not conduct any in-person services in 2021.

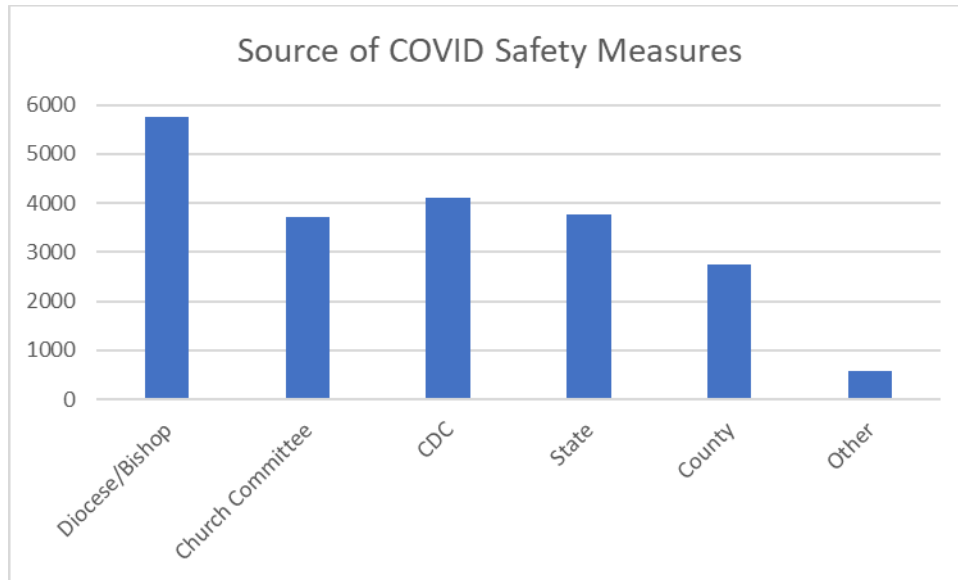
### *Themes of Change*

One prevalent theme in these responses was that of change. Congregations mentioned trying one thing and adapting part way through the year due the changing reality of Covid. Many adapted their restrictions at one point or another and used the available information to make the best decision they could at any given point in time. These protocols were often not static but a changing process.

A second prevalent theme is that of implementing several protocols to address several facets of church life. The average number of the safety measures listed above that any one congregation used was about four. Several responding congregations indicated that they had even more protocols than they listed in their answer to the question. It is clear that most congregations used several tactics to address Covid and limit its impact to their worship life.

### **Source for Guidance**

There were several sources that congregations turned to in order to help their decision-making process about implementing safety measures. These sources include the Bishop or Diocese, a church committee, the US Center for Disease Control, and the state and/or county in which the congregation is located.



Of the 6,051 congregations that responded to the question “what were the source of COVID safety measures taken” on the annual Parochial Report, 95% said the Bishop or Diocese, 61% said a church committee, 68% said the CDC, 62% said their state, 46% said their county, and 10% said other sources. 3% of congregations said all of the listed sources and 25% said the Bishop or Diocese, a church committee, the CDC, their state, and their county. 90% of responding congregations cited two or more sources. These percentages are similar for all congregations, congregations just located in the United States, and congregations located outside the United States.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, congregations in The Episcopal Church took varied approaches to return to in-person worship in 2021. Safety measures such as promoting general health behaviors, changing the content of worship services, and changing the procedures of worship services were all used to varying degrees. Many congregations implemented several safety measures, and several congregations adapted their protocols as the year progressed. Congregations looked to a variety of sources, and often more than one source, for these safety measures.

The statistics presented in this report refer only to the 5,600 congregations who answered the question about safety measures in the 2021 Parochial Report and provided details about what measures they implemented, not the entire Episcopal Church. Further, the protocols listed in this report are some of the most common but are not an exhaustive list of every safety measure every congregation used.

The road to reopening was not simple for most congregations but through the use of safety measures, many congregations were able to meet in-person for worship in some way in 2021.