



THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF MARYLAND

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs Regarding Bishops' Pastoral Directive on Vaccines)

1. Why is the directive necessary?

We are in a public health crisis. As of the date of this directive (9/7/21), more than 100,000 Americans are hospitalized with COVID-19, the highest total since January 2021. Deaths have more than doubled in the last two weeks, averaging over 1,100 a day. Pediatric COVID cases are skyrocketing, with 200,000 new infections in a week and 330 children admitted to hospitals every day. In Maryland, the number of hospitalizations and deaths have spiked sharply since July, and significantly in our state, approximately 92 percent of all confirmed COVID-19 cases have been from among those who are not vaccinated.

In response to our Baptismal Covenant's promise to "love your neighbor as yourself" (*BCP, p. 305*), the Church has a moral as well as civic obligation to promote personal and social responsibility, and to save lives. We are a community of love, extending the compassionate ministry of Jesus during this grave time as agents of healing. Vaccinations, although not a 100 percent guarantee against infection and illness, are the world's best chance to save millions of lives against this deadly virus. God has granted us minds to think, hearts to love, and hands to serve; thus through this directive we are using these God-given gifts so that the most vulnerable among us - especially the health-compromised, the elderly, and our children - may live.

2. Are bishops authorized to make this directive?

Diocesan bishops have authority over all ministries performed under the auspices of The Episcopal Church within their geographical jurisdictions. Their responsibility as the chief pastors of their dioceses sometimes demands that they issue pastoral directives for the welfare of all the members of the diocese and on the behalf of the communities they serve. When they were ordained to the episcopal office, bishops made promises to "be merciful to all, show compassion to the poor and strangers, and defend those who have no helper." (*BCP, p. 518*) This directive is in service of defending those who have a right to expect their ecclesiastical leaders to help them worship, teach, learn and serve in as safe an environment as possible.

3. Who is included in the directive?

This directive applies to all clergy, staff and volunteers in the Diocese of Maryland **whose service or ministry requires continuous in-person contact with others**. This includes but is not limited to diocesan staff, church staff, parochial school and daycare staff, and volunteers performing ministries under the auspices of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland. The directive applies to all persons identified unless they have been advised by their primary care provider not to be vaccinated.

Examples of specific volunteer roles include but are not limited to the following: choir members, choral leaders, lay readers, chalicists, lay Eucharistic ministers/visitors, ushers, greeters, servers of food and beverages, child caregivers, Sunday School or childrens' chapel leaders.

4. What is the definition of "fully vaccinated" for the purposes of this directive?

For the purposes of this directive, “fully vaccinated” means that the individual has completed the immunization regimen for their particular vaccine. For example, for Moderna and Pfizer, both shots must have been received by October 18; for Johnson & Johnson, the one shot must have been administered by October 18.

5. Are booster shots required by the directive?

No, not at this time.

6. Does the directive apply to worship attendees?

No, unless they are included in those groups listed in question #3.

7. Do non-church outside groups who use church property fall under this directive?

No, but they should be advised of the policy for Episcopal Church staff and volunteers, and be encouraged to follow it for their own safety and the health of those with whom they are in contact. Congregations are encouraged to continue to insist that outside groups practice safe mitigation and disinfecting practices while in church space.

8. Does the directive apply to groups such as Boy Scouts if a congregation serves as the charter organization?

Yes, because their organization falls under the authority of the congregation. Therefore, any volunteer whose service or ministry requires continuous in-person contact with others must comply with the directive. All other members of the group should be advised of the policy and be encouraged to follow it for their own safety and the health of those with whom they are in contact.

9. After October 18, 2021, is the directive still in effect for new staff and volunteers?

All newly hired staff and volunteers in continuous contact with others must agree to be vaccinated if not exempted for medical reasons.

10. What about HIPAA?

Since 1996, the privacy rules described in the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) have been widely misunderstood. The HIPAA privacy rules are rather limited: they were designed to prevent the *release* of protected health information by medical providers without one’s consent. The rules have nothing to do whether one can or should answer questions about one’s vaccination status or any other health issue.

“There’s nothing in [HIPAA] that prohibits businesses such as restaurants, gyms, or movie theaters, or your employer from asking you for proof of vaccination. HIPAA privacy rules do not prevent you from answering questions about whether you’ve been vaccinated...if you decide not to disclose that information to your employer, you will likely be considered unvaccinated, and that could lead to changes in how or where you work, or even to loss of your job. But again, that’s unrelated to HIPAA.” (www.health.harvard.edu)

11. What about other virus mitigation measures?

The other mitigation measures remain in effect--mask wearing, social distancing, disinfecting high-touch surfaces--according to those required by the Diocese of Maryland’s color-coded phases. (See our [COVID-19 response page](#) online.)

12. Is proof of vaccination status required, and what are the consequences of non-compliance?

Each person falling under one of the categories in Question #3 must submit a completed Declaration of Status Form to the Bishop's Directive of September 7, 2021 by October 18. Clergy's Declaration of Status forms are kept by the Bishop's Office, and may be completed online. Completed forms for lay congregational staff, school staff, and volunteer leaders are to be considered confidential and kept by their congregation's or school's offices. Photos or scans of vaccination cards are not required, nor any other written proof of vaccination.

Other than the completed Declaration of Status Form, the only other documentation required by this directive is that a medically-exempt person must attach written proof from their primary care provider that they cannot receive a COVID-19 vaccination because of their health status.

A community of love is contingent upon being a community of trust. Truth-telling is expected of everyone in our diocesan community, and breaches of trust are serious matters in the Church. When they are ordained, clergy vow to be guided by the pastoral direction and leadership of their bishop. Refusal to do so could expose a member of the clergy to disciplinary actions according to the Title IV canons of The Episcopal Church.

If a church staff member, volunteer or teacher refuses to complete a Declaration of Status Form or comply with the directive, then the rector/vicar/priest-in-charge (or the vestry in the absence of a priest) should handle the situation pastorally, and actions may be taken that result in dismissal from their jobs due to inhibition of their duties. Some ministries have already had to take these actions due to a person's non-compliance of safety measures.

13. What are the protocols for those with medical exemptions?

The protocols outlined in the diocesan guidelines for the color-coded phases apply to everyone, no matter their vaccination status. Those who are exempted from vaccination due to medical reasons should be advised to continue with other mitigation strategies such as mandatory mask usage, temperature checks and periodic COVID testing for their own safety and that of those with whom they have close contact.

14. What about those who claim a "religious exemption" from this directive?

The Episcopal Church is a religious organization that has its own requirements for ministry and service performed under its auspices. This directive derives from its moral beliefs on what it means to be a community of faith that acts responsibly in the midst of a health crisis. Thus there will be no exemptions to this directive for persons who refuse to be vaccinated on "religious" grounds..

The private beliefs of a few cannot be allowed to compromise the health and safety of the many. Sometimes, privately-held beliefs are based on information that is not verified and accepted by the majority of the scientific community and can thus distort truth to support broader social or political views. **In keeping with our Anglican spiritual and theological tradition, Episcopalians believe that there is no essential conflict between divine truth and scientific truth.** And as a Church, we believe that the refusal to be vaccinated on religious grounds does not conform to our Anglican Christian heritage of making decisions based on Scripture, tradition, and reason.

Please email regather@episcopalmaryland.org for questions beyond those addressed in these FAQs.