

Dear colleagues,

A word of support and encouragement. You've been on the minds of ALMA board members during this awful surge of the pandemic. While members of our Sunday assemblies are able to choose whether or not to worship in person, parish ministers and musicians are always physically present, often serving at multiple weekend liturgies. Thank you for your dedication to those you serve, for your creativity and willingness to adapt to changing circumstances, for hanging in there when stress and uncertainty are wearing you out. You're front-line heroes of the church.

Though parishes are following safety protocols to mitigate the risk of coronavirus transmission, many of us are nonetheless anxious, especially given the disheartening COVID test positivity rate here in Wisconsin. Some of us are over 65. Some live with pre-existing conditions that make them more susceptible to infection and serious illness. We are rightly disturbed when in-person worshipers don't wear masks correctly, don't observe proper distancing, or don't keep their masks on while chatting outside.

A scriptural image comes to mind: the apostles out in a boat in the midst of a storm. They have no control over the intensity or duration of the storm, which requires of them extraordinary measures and persistence in the midst of fear. They must hang on and weather the storm until the wind diminishes and the sea calms down. Colleagues, we're in the midst of a different kind of storm. Our boats are being tossed about in circumstances that leave us feeling powerless. We have no control over the intensity or duration of the pandemic. We can't control the attitudes and actions of others. Yet we are not helpless. We can tend to and secure our boats, protect ourselves and support one another, struggle to persist through our fear, and weather this storm until the danger has passed. Faith tells us that Jesus is in our midst. At times it may seem like he is still asleep in the boat (!), but Jesus will never abandon us.

Parish safety protocols generally don't address many of the specific circumstances and needs of liturgical musicians. We thought it might be helpful to put together a list of suggestions and practices concerning our own safety and that of other music ministers. You'll find that list at the end of this letter. Some things on the list will seem obvious or may already have become routine for you; yet as we compiled this list, each of us mentioned ideas that the other two hadn't thought of.

Suggestions concerning our physical health are a place to start. It is only natural that we should experience anxiety, anger, stress from "not knowing," and a weariness that saps our motivation, our spirit, our outlook. To help support our mental and emotional health, we've asked a licensed counselor in Milwaukee, Stephanie Delmore, for help. Stephanie recently has been working with Catholic school administrators and teachers in the archdiocese. She readily said "Yes." We're grateful for that. Stephanie is going to be reaching out in two ways. First, she is preparing a letter to our members that will include links to mental and spiritual health resources. We will be sharing Stephanie's letter very soon. Second, Stephanie is preparing a webinar on mental and spiritual health for our members that will be offered after the holidays. Those who register will be asked to do a bit of reflection and homework beforehand.

Know that you, your families, and your parishes are in our thoughts and prayers. Clearer skies are on the horizon, but the danger of the pandemic has not yet passed. Let us support and encourage one another as we continue to weather the storm.

Sincerely,
Steve Janco, Alverno College
Kim Mandelkow, Office of Worship
Brian McLinden, Chair, ALMA board

Liturgical Musician Safety

- Avoid what the CDC calls the “three Cs:” spaces that are closed, crowded, or involve close contact.
- Maintain at least a six-foot distance when meeting with others. Meet in a larger space—outdoors if at all possible. All should be wearing a mask. Stay far away from anyone who isn’t wearing a mask!
- Open doors (and windows) between liturgies to ventilate the worship space, even in colder weather.
- If at all possible, open a window (even a crack) in any enclosed space to improve airflow and help disperse aerosols.

Masks

- Properly worn two- or three-layer woven cotton masks and multi-ply paper masks significantly reduce the possibility of virus transmission. Disposable N95 masks, which filter up to 95% of small particles, are more readily available today than they were earlier this year. Masks made of stretchy material or synthetic fabrics are NOT as effective.
- Sanitize your hands before touching your mask—and then again after. Avoid touching the part that covers your nose and mouth.
- Masks must be tight-fitting, covering nose and mouth. Face sizes and shapes differ considerably, however. If a mask easily slips off your nose while talking or singing, secure the mask more tightly (try crossing ear loops) or use another (perhaps larger or differently shaped) type of mask.
- If you wear glasses, a mask with a metal nose bridge may help reduce fogging. Inserting a section of rolled-up Kleenex under the top of the mask may also help. Some suggest washing your glasses with dish soap and then letting the lenses drip dry.
- Fabric masks should be washed/laundered after each use. Paper masks should be discarded after each use—or at the end of each day.
- “Singers’ masks” are shaped to allow more open space around the mouth, however masks made of stiffer or synthetic fabrics will not be as effective at reducing particle transmission. Singers who use such masks must increase their distance from others.

Cantors and Cantor Stand

- The cantor (only one per Mass) should wear a mask at all times—and keep at least a twelve-foot distance when singing.
- Use a separate binder for each cantor, each containing all music for the liturgy.
- Avoid using common hymnals, songbooks, or psalm collections.
- Sanitize any handled part of the cantor stand and microphone between liturgies.
- For the time being, it is safest for the cantor to lead the responsorial psalm from the cantor stand, rather than from the ambo.
- Consider a separate wind screen (microphone cover) for each cantor.
 - If using a single wind screen, sanitize between uses. An aerosol disinfectant, such as ODOBAN, is effective and readily available.
- Wipe down cantor stand before and after each liturgy: surface, edges, shelf.
- Install a plexiglass shield in front of the cantor stand if relatively close to an aisle or pew. Sanitize between uses. Or, if possible, move the cantor stand further away. If this is not practical, set up a music stand and microphone at a safer distance.
- Choirs are not to be used at this time. Signing a waiver not to hold the parish responsible for COVID infections does not permit the parish to use a choir.

Accompanists and Instruments

- Wipe down covers of accompaniment books, binders, psalm collections, etc. before and after each liturgy (use).
- Sanitize organ manuals, draw knobs, rocker tabs, pistons, on/off switch, music stand, bench, music lamp, etc. before the first weekend Mass and after the last. Wipe down between liturgies if more than one accompanist will be using the instrument.
- Sanitize piano keys, the lid prop and edges of the piano lid, the full music stand, the keyboard cover, the bench, and any other areas that are touched.
- If a microphone is used at the organ and/or piano, sanitize mic, switch, and any parts of the stand that are touched.
- Wind instruments (brass, woodwinds) are not permitted at this time. String and percussion instruments are fine.

Congregation

- Everyone wears a mask. Opportunities for congregational singing should be limited. Members of the assembly should be encouraged to sing very softly or hum.

- To the extent possible, limit the amount of time the congregation spends in the worship space. Congregating before or after Mass is to be avoided.