

Lifting Final COVID Restrictions

On Monday, March 1, 2022, Winchester Thurston informed us that they are responding to recent CDC guidance by lifting their masking mandate in early March. Prior to this announcement, we had been in discussion with them about how to develop a timeline for taking this step – now we are largely free to move forward in ways that we determine to be best.

Over the past two years City Reformed Church has undertaken steps to mitigate the spread of COVID19 infections in our midst. We believe that the risk presented by this disease warranted steps of precaution.¹ While nearly all normal ministry activities resumed in August of 2021, we returned to mask wearing in the fall when the Delta-variant of the Coronavirus emerged and drove infections back up. We did this for several reasons.² At this point, we can say that the situation has radically changed. Case counts in Allegheny County continue to drop. Vaccinations offer a great deal of protection against hospitalization/death and are widely available. New treatments for COVID19 further reduce mortality rates even for those with severe infections. Our healthcare system is not facing the threat of being overrun by cases.³ Large numbers of people have now had COVID and have developed a measure of natural immunity. In summary, scientists and public health experts agree that COVID19 will never go away ("COVID Zero"). Rather, as we consider changes, we look for indicators that COVID19 is becoming a less deadly condition, affecting fewer people, and disrupting society to a progressively decreasing degree.

Because of these developments, we believe it is time to transition away from our mandatory mask policy at our Morning Worship Service and Sunday School classes.

Therefore, the final mask-requirements⁴ at City Reformed will end, beginning Sunday, March 20, 2022.

This will apply to all people, regardless of age, vaccination status, or prior infection history.

¹ The initial estimate that COVID-19 could have approximately a 1% mortality rate was actually fairly accurate. That statistic was shared as a guess during the first COVID-time sermon and remained our estimate throughout. When cases began to subside in Spring 2021, the national mortality rate was about 1.8% for people who contracted the disease. Of course, the impact of the disease was felt disproportionately by older people and those with comorbidities. While counting all COVID cases and isolated COVID as the primary cause of death was not always easy to do, the sheer volume of numbers (at the time, in the Spring of 2021 there were 32 million infections and 600,000 deaths at that time) mean that the 1.8% mortality estimate is a very good ballpark figure. Vaccinations and the emergence of new virus variants changed those calculations over time. It is generally accepted that while the Omicron variant of COVID continues to be lethal in some cases, it is much less deadly than prior variants and the arrival of vaccinations and improved medical care has significantly reduced the risk posed by the coronavirus.

² Reasons include: Vaccine availability was still limited quite a bit by age group, life-saving hospital care was limited, few people had natural immunity, and until the Omicron variant emerged the mortality rate of COVID-19 was quite substantial.

³ For these reasons, the most recent to CDC guidance places our county in a low-risk category based on the above factors and no longer recommends mask-wearing.

⁴ At this point, the Sunday morning activities at Winchester Thurston are the only church events where we require masking. This requirement remained in place because we wanted to be more cautious with gatherings that were held in a densely populated area while COVID remained a significant concern. It also remained in place because our landlord's COVID policy required it and we did not want to engage with them in a dishonest manner and risk our future business arrangement or our witness for Christian virtue.

While change is coming soon, please continue to wear a mask while at Sunday Morning activities for the next two weeks. This respects our landlords and also allows our congregation to adjust to these changes.

- 1.) *To those who find this change to be concerning*, we hope that you can think about this in the following way. Beginning March 20, 2022, our services will really be “mask-optional.” All members are welcome to mask if they would like to do so. We believe that the availability of more effective masks to the general public has made the step of personal masking a more effective mitigating factor than it was early in the pandemic. Toward this end, City Reformed has purchased a supply of KN-95 masks which will be available at our worship services for those who would like to have one. Furthermore, we have always recognized that wearing masks presents barriers to relational connection between people and a distraction for many people as they participate in worship. We chose to ask all of our members to mask in the service because we believed that there was a public health concern that demanded this sort of significant action. We asked many of our members to sacrifice their freedom for the sake of public good and in love for those who had particular risks and concerns related to COVID19. Even as we encourage personal mask-wearing for those who feel ongoing concern, we recognize that this change will bring a measure of discomfort to some of our members. In a sense, we have asked some of our members to embrace uncomfortable constraints for the sake of the congregation as a whole. We are now asking other members to embrace these new changes in different but reciprocal acts of love for the community.
- 2.) *To those who don't like enduring two more Sundays of mandatory masking*, we hope you can think about this in the following way. We have always made it a priority throughout the pandemic to state clear expectations for our services well in advance so that everyone would know what they are getting into when they attend an event. The last two years have been hard and not everyone has processed this the same way. We have varied levels of risk and varied responses to the concerns related to COVID19. As a church we have sought to prioritize patience with each other as an expression of love. Until very recently, we did not have the ability to control our own timeline at the morning services, and we have been promising that our steps would be deliberate. Case counts are falling rapidly, but two more weeks of masking will see us in an even better place as a county (Lord willing) and will allow time for everyone in our congregation to process the coming changes.
- 3.) *To parents who are unsure how their kids will participate in nursery*. We will not require masks for any of our activities going forward, including nursery. However, parents may decide that they want their own children to remain masked during their time in the nursery and our disciplers will make every reasonable effort to direct those children to remain masked.
- 4.) *To those who are just excited* that risk factors are down, mitigation steps are no longer seen as continuing to be necessary, and hope for significant change is on the very near horizon – now is a good time to say a prayer of thanks. It may also be a time to share your joy in “hymns, songs, and spiritual songs” (Eph 5), and “make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation” (Ps 95.)

Thank you all, again, for your tremendous patience and care for each other during these past two years. This has not been easy and it has not been fun. As difficult as the last two years have been, we have seen God's abundant grace to our congregation. We have seen heroic acts of service by our members as they serve our congregation and the broader community. Our members have been spared the most severe forms of harm from COVID19 infections. We have retained a remarkable degree of church unity

in spite of differences about the best ways to handle these unprecedented challenges. The coming years will likely show that some challenges struck deeper than we realized, but also that God was growing us and providing for us in ways that we cannot now see. We do know that God has answered many of our prayers and for that we can be extremely thankful.

During the first two Sundays of March, I will be traveling to and from a RUF mission trip in Yakima Washington. While I will miss being with you all for the next two weeks, I am looking forward to seeing you again soon. And I look forward to knowing that when I next gather with this congregation (Lord willing), I will see a lot more of your faces.

In Christ,

Matt (on behalf of the Session of City Reformed Church)