

Dear City Reformed,

For the last two months, City Reformed leaders have been anticipating changes to our ministry schedule for the fall. In the meantime, people have taken some long-needed rest and vacation. We have also been talking and praying about how to proceed this fall. We believe that it is time to return to a full-orbed ministry schedule, but we also recognize that COVID-19 continues to be a matter that requires consideration.

As we present to you our plans for ministry in the fall, I believe that it can be viewed as three steps forward and one step back. We believe that the compromise that we outline below gives us the best path toward reestablishing our full range of ministry while still caring for the health concerns of our community.

Ministry Relaunch (“Three Steps Forward”)

On Sunday, September 12, we will return to one large morning worship service and resume the order of worship which we had used pre-COVID. (For example, we will return to more songs in worship.)

This single service will be held at 10:15 am.

Also, on Sunday, September 12, we will return to a weekly, one-hour evening service held at the Greenfield Chapel.

On Sunday, October 3, we will resume our Christian education classes held at WT. Classes will run from 9:00-9:50 through the end of the semester.

COVID Precautions (“One Step Back”)

On Sunday, August 29, we will return to a policy of mandatory masking at all indoor activities at WT, and for the evening worship service. (See appendix for why we believe that this is necessary.)

Remaining Unchanged (“March-in-Place”)

All small group activities are held at the discretion of the leaders after discussion with the group and consideration of the multiple concerns.

We are not reinstating a mandatory mask policy for all indoor

activities. In a sense, we are returning to our policy as we left it last June.

After consideration of many options, repeated prayers and lots of discussions among church leaders, we believe that this combination of steps provides the best approach for us going forward. We recognize that there is a balance of concerns that is not easy to balance. It is important for us to return to ministry that nourishes and sustains God's people. It is also important for us to recognize the legitimate concerns which continue to be present, especially through the rise of the Delta-variant of the Coronavirus. Balancing these concerns is not easy and we recognize that some of our members will feel either frustrated or fearful.

To those frustrated by the return to a mask mandate, I would ask that you focus on the opportunity to embrace our full range of ministry in a more sustainable way and bear with us as we take steps that we deem necessary for the good of the larger community. Masking also creates a climate in which many members and visitors are more likely to attend public worship.

To those who feel fearful for a return to a single service. We encourage you to remember that our current vaccines show evidence of offering strong protection against severe illness, and that group masking is a helpful tool to reduce transmission in large group settings. The evening service will offer a smaller venue for those who desire more elbow room, and we intend to continue offering our livestream through the end of the calendar year. It is not possible to live life or do ministry without any risk, even after we have taken precautions. God calls his people to live their lives outside the domain of fear. While wisdom leads us to take necessary precautions, courage calls us to move forward even when there are uncertainties.

I think I can speak for all of us when I say that it is disappointing to be having these conversations, again. We had hoped that the post-vaccine world would eliminate the need to give regard to the

Coronavirus. But, even as we seek to take reasonable precaution my hope is that we can think about this fall as an opportunity to return to the rhythms of ministry that have sustained us in the past. The total trajectory of this series of changes is one of forward movement and increased openness.

Thank you for your prayers and understanding.

In Christ,



Pastor Matt

Appendix: Why is it necessary to return to masking after a highly effective vaccine has been made readily available?

I will begin by saying that it is a great disappointment for me to have to return to a mask mandate for our public worship services. We had hoped to avoid this, but as we surveyed the range of options, every other decision entailed a greater cost or limitation. The pressing desire is to move forward with ministry, and I have become convinced that this is the path that most directly achieves that goal.

I also recognize that people are coming at this issue from a wide range of places. Depending on what you read, the news about COVID surges around the country can be downright frightening.

Currently, Allegheny County has been designated at the level of “High Transmission.” We have also seen an increase in hospitalizations. All of this can bring a really deflating feeling that we are back in the valley of COVID darkness.

So, first of all, we want to put this concern in perspective. Our public health system has taken an approach to the pandemic that was driven by vaccination. Last spring, we published an addendum to our vaccination paper from years before in which we encouraged members to pursue vaccination. As the center piece of the strategy, the available vaccines have proved effective against getting sick, and

very effective against severe illness and death. The preponderance of cases reported are among those who are not vaccinated.

Furthermore, the most highly vulnerable people among us and around us have been largely vaccinated. While “Delta” is more contagious than before it is not necessarily more deadly.

Which leads us to the main question: Why is it necessary to take any precaution after the advent of vaccines? Or, to put it differently, getting a vaccine was supposed to mean that I could take off my mask, what happened?

The simple answer is that the Delta-variant appears to be behaving differently than the form of the Coronavirus that was present among us until Summer 2021. Two factors have been observed which change the calculations which had previously shaped our post-vaccine behavior. First, Delta seems to be more contagious. As a result, it can jump more easily between unvaccinated persons even when a significant portion of the population (as in Allegheny County) are vaccinated. Second, it appears that vaccinated persons can transmit the virus more than was previously thought, even if they usually get only a mild form of sickness themselves.

When we consider both of these concerns, it seems clear that we need to reevaluate the topic of mask wearing in public places. In our community, children under-12 all remain unvaccinated. While children have seldom experienced dramatic infections, it seems desirable to take reasonable precautions to limit the spread among our youngest members. Second, some of our members and visitors remain unvaccinated. We have not taken the step of mandating this for any activity or ministry (other than nursery volunteers.) We have made a recommendation about the vaccination, but we respect the liberty of conscience among members. In summary, when our congregation gathers in a large group, inside a fairly contained space, we believe that we have the responsibility to take this reasonable step of precaution to limit the spread of COVID-19.

A few final points of clarification. The CDC recommends indoor mask wearing when a county has reached a “substantial” to “high” level of Coronavirus transmission. Currently, Allegheny County is at a “high” level of transmission. Thankfully, other parts of our state, and even our nearby region remain lower and mask wearing would not be recommended. When our county drops below the rates of transmission which trigger this advice, we will reevaluate.

Furthermore, our current landlord – Winchester Thurston – requires masking for all indoor events. We have not presented this position as a result of their COVID policy, but adopting a resumption of masking at WT will bring us into compliance with their policy as we head back into the school year. Had we reached a different decision about the necessity of masking, we would have had to look for a new venue.

In conclusion, I would like to lay out the philosophy of ministry that we hope to pursue in regard to this matter. In doing so, I will use the analogy of driving a car. There are times, when the outside circumstances determine that it is not wise to drive your car.

Blizzards, black ice, and tornados are times when wisdom requires one to park the car or else drive in severely modified ways. By way of analogy the beginning of the pandemic had a lock-down in which we essentially “parked the car of ministry” for a few weeks. Then as we began to reopen, we limited how much we could drive. Our indoor services had attendance limits and we leaned heavily into outdoor services and shorter evening services. But throughout most of 2020 up until now, we have kept driving. Going forward, our desire is to return to the full range of ministry that we typically do during the school year. We want to drive everywhere that we need to go. We don’t regard our surrounding circumstances as being the equivalent of a tornado or blizzard. However, wisdom still requires caution and steps of prevention. We will continue to drive for our full range of functions, but we will wear our seatbelts. By way of analogy, wearing a mask when our county has a high rate of Coronavirus transmission is like wearing a seatbelt while driving a car. A seatbelt can be mildly annoying and can infringe on your personal freedom to move around

the car. But, when it is needed, it can play a significant role in maintaining your health.