

Reopening Member Letter

5/14/20

Dear City Reformed,

This Friday, May 15, Allegheny County will be shifted to the Yellow Phase of Governor Wolf's reopening plan. That means that the Stay-at-home order will be lifted, group sizes will be increased to a maximum of 25, and more businesses will reopen. We believe that this will allow our church to take our first steps to resuming more normal operations, but the steps will be deliberate. It is certain that there will be many opinions about the county's reopening in our congregation. Some will think this has been too slow to arrive, and others that we should delay longer. Each of us will have very difficult decisions to make in our personal lives and in our occupations. Please keep in mind that the movement to the Yellow Phase does not mean that the danger has passed, but that the most severe methods of "aggressive mitigation" are no longer deemed necessary. Please continue to make every reasonable effort to slow the spread of this infection. Let's also aim to be gracious with each other as we navigate different circumstances and make difficult judgment calls.

I am writing this letter to talk about changes that we foresee happening in our congregation. With the Stay-at-home order lifted this Friday and with group sizes increased, City Reformed will allow our small groups the freedom to meet in safe and controlled settings. Each small group in our church (including community groups, or other church groups) must submit a "reopening plan" before they can begin meeting in person. This plan will assess the composition of the people in each group, the space available to meet in, and the specific concerns that a group may face. We expect that some groups will not meet in person immediately. Groups with children and vulnerable people will find in-person meetings to be particularly difficult.

We are also asking groups to consider whether some of their members can safely meet to watch the livestream worship service together on Sundays. In some groups, it may only be a portion that are able to meet together for this purpose. We recognize that there will be inherent obstacles to follow the required guidelines for groups meeting with children. While we may all make tentative steps going forward, our overall plan as a church anticipates that we can meet in small groups long before we can meet as one large congregation. We have no idea how long the Yellow Phase guidelines will last, but it is quite likely that we will spend a significant amount of time in this phase. During this season of Yellow Phase, we will seek to express our group identity as God's people in smaller, dispersed gatherings.

We also plan to expand our "in-person" attendance at the worship service from 10 to 25, following guidelines from our state. People who are interested in attending should sign up by sending an email to Sol (sol@cityreformed.org). Each week we will invite interested people to attend the service in person. Priority will be given to people who are otherwise socially isolated, but most members will have an opportunity to attend. Because we will not have childcare facilities available, some families will be limited in their participation. During the Yellow Phase, we will only allow children to attend who have shown the ability to maintain social distancing guidelines throughout the service. It is understood that anyone who signs up is agreeing to abide by the guidelines for official activities listed below, including wearing a facemask throughout the service.

With this in mind, it is important to be clear about the guidelines that we are asking our members to observe while they meet together officially (such as a small group or our Sunday Worship Service.) While we see inherent wisdom in all of these guidelines, it is not our intention to require adherence to these policies in social interactions beyond "official church functions." (See Appendix A.)

- 1.) **Please continue all CDC recommended behavior for official gatherings.** (Wash your hands, cough into your sleeve, avoid handshakes, etc.)

- 2.) **If you have an infectious disease, do not attend any church events until you have had no fever for 72 hours, 10 days have passed since your symptoms first appeared, and other symptoms (cough, shortness of breath, etc) have improved.** (Per CDC guidance.¹)
- 3.) **Please continue to observe social distancing by remaining six feet apart from the nearest person who is not part of your household group.** (This may require small groups to think about creative places to meet.)
- 4.) **Members who are highly vulnerable or who have had contact with infected persons should refrain from attending an official group or service.**
- 5.) **Please wear a facemask during the entirety of your participation in any official City Reformed event.** (See Appendix B.)

Our goal is to find ways to stay connected and meet together while recognizing the danger that COVID-19 places on our health care professionals and the most vulnerable among us. The guidelines from our health departments are intended to help us as we attempt to strike that delicate balance. All of the guidelines listed above require members to accept certain constraints on their behavior. Some are uncomfortable. We all long for the day when these are no longer necessary. However, observing these constraints protects our own people, shows concern for our neighbors, and creates an atmosphere where it is possible to increase fellowship interactions and business interactions. (For our members who are unemployed, that is no small consideration.) We all desire to see economic recovery and expansion of social interactions. The best way to promote that outcome is to take every reasonable step to reduce the spread of infection.

With caution and courage, we can begin to walk faithfully in this new phase of the Coronavirus Pandemic.

In Christ,



Pastor Matt

Appendix A: What makes a group official?

When we refer to “official groups” we are referencing small groups and church worship services. There are other policies that we have made that apply to official group gatherings of City Reformed Church. Over the years, we have found it helpful to distinguish what sort of meeting is official and what sort is not official. For example, we put official church meetings in the bulletin, but we do not advertise a personal event in our main announcement section. In general, this is a good guide for whether a group is official. If a group meeting is listed in the bulletin, under the supervision of our church leaders, and accessible to the general public, then the group is likely official.

Another example is our Alcohol Policy. We have found it wise practice to refrain from alcohol at all official church events. (Communion excepted.) We do not believe that it is wrong for Christians to consume alcohol in moderation, but believe that it created unnecessary stumbling blocks and temptations when it was present for social drinking purposes at our official church gatherings. When members of the church meet outside of these official gatherings, they are not bound by this constraint.

That same distinction is helpful as we consider these Yellow Phase policies. When we gather as a group, we need to give concern to the most vulnerable among us and must err on the side of caution. Furthermore, if something terrible (like a mass infection) happened at an official event, it could have serious ramifications on our entire church. When you gather in an official group, the outcome of your decision affects the group as a whole and the witness of the church. With that in mind, this “official” distinction has great importance.

¹ Current Guidance on Sickness (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/steps-when-sick.html>)

Appendix B: Why Masks?

I am well aware that people have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in a wide range of ways. For some people, our decision to require masks at church functions will seem to be onerous. It may seem unnecessary to some or an unwelcome imposition on our freedom. As we moved toward this reopening process, it seemed clear that our church needed a clear rule regarding the use of masks in public spaces. After consulting with several health care professionals, our deacons, and the women's council, the session made the decision to make masks mandatory for the following reasons.

- 1.) **We wear masks to respect the government.** Wearing masks is the clear guidance from our public health officials²³. As facemasks are required to enter stores, it would seem parallel that our official church gatherings would have this same policy. In actuality, our governor has given great deference to religious institutions and has not directly mandated compliance with group meetings. However, in doing so, he has placed the expectation of respectful compliance with health care guidelines on religious groups. By observing this directive, we are honoring the civil leaders that God has ordained to be in place at this time. (See Romans 13:1-7, 1 Peter 2:13-17)
- 2.) **We wear masks to preserve life.** Most importantly, wearing masks appears to reduce the transmission of COVID-19. It appears that masks are most effective in reducing the air borne particles that a person emits from their nose and mouth. With this in mind, it is often said that the mask is more about protecting other people from your germs, than about protecting yourself from the germs of others. Wearing masks in public can reduce the infection rate which in turn, reduces the mortality rate. Loving our neighbor means seeking to preserve their life in all reasonable ways. (See Westminster Larger Catechism #135, "Duties Required by the Sixth Commandment.)
- 3.) **We wear masks to encourage the cautious.** For several Sundays in a row, I made the argument that people have quite varied circumstances and quite varied responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some people are more (or less) vulnerable. Some people are more (or less concerned). Some people are more (or less) socially isolated. On top of that, we have varied personalities, social outlooks, economic circumstances, and so on. As we turn the corner and enter into the Yellow Phase, some people will be raring to go out and get involved. Others will be tentative and cautious. In addition to our natural dispositions, there are very good reasons for some people to be cautious. In fact, some people who are most vulnerable should refrain from being in public settings until there is a reduced risk of infection. For many other people, venturing into a small group setting will not be highly risky, but it could feel quite threatening. By wearing masks, we are creating a more controlled setting which is most secure for the most people. The Bible has a host of instructions that guide how our behavior is meant to be modified out of concern to the most vulnerable among us. (See Psalm 146:9, 1 Cor 12:22-23, and 1 Cor 8:10-13.)
- 4.) **We wear masks to uphold our witness to the outside world.** Wearing masks does not prevent all disease transmission, and any group gathering has an element of risk. But if our church were to flaunt these guidelines in our official gatherings and people were to become infected, there would be damage to our reputation with outsiders. When we gather with less than rigorous safety observance, our neighbors do not see bravery, they see a foolish risk. They see a risk that could increase the infection rate in our region, threaten the health of others, and inhibit the resumption of vital economic activity. (See Titus 1:5-6, 1 Cor 6:5-7.)

² From the governor's "Process to Reopen Pennsylvania" (<https://www.governor.pa.gov/process-to-reopen-pennsylvania/>): "Pennsylvania plans to proceed with returning to work cautiously. Broad reopenings or reopenings that are not structured around ongoing social distancing, *universal masking*, or other public health guidance would likely result in a spike of cases and new stay-at-home and closure orders."

³ From CDC guidelines (Federal): <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html>