

September 2022

I'm excited to begin the new program year with the quality music and musical support that our choral program provides! I'm also excited for the joy and energy that each of you bring, and I have missed being together over the summer. As we prepare to reconvene, please familiarize yourself with the following Covid policy update.

I and our lay leadership and staff had hoped that Covid concerns would be further behind us than they prove to be. When we finished the program year last May we were at a MEDIUM CDC Community Level and had some masking and distancing policies in place, although they had been relaxed from what they were previously. Over the summer the level raised again to HIGH, and we moved to once again strongly encouraging everyone to wear a mask, and to requiring everyone serving in a leadership role in worship to wear a mask, while also reverting to receiving Communion only in the pews at a distance.

As I write this our CDC Community level remains at HIGH for Richmond City, meaning CDC recommends that masks should be worn indoors, and all should remain up to date with Covid-19 vaccines (if they are able to receive vaccinations). As a reminder, *at all community levels the CDC recommends wearing masks in public transportation settings*. Given the higher risk of transmission through singing, we continue to equate our rehearsal room risk level to that of a public transportation setting. In addition, Dr. Fauci continues to encourage everyone to wear a mask when the Covid Community Levels are at MEDIUM or HIGH.

The choir is to be congratulated for being a part of our success last year! We had multiple incidents where one or another choir member contracted Covid, but, *because we were all masked for rehearsals and for leading worship, NONE of the rest of us contracted Covid-19* and the choir was able to continue to lead worship without interruption. It is true that some other choirs have given up on masking requirements, and it is also true that VDH reports that many of those choirs and churches have not been without incident of Covid outbreaks that have disrupted their music programs.

Therefore, for all the reasons above, masks continue to be required in the choir room during rehearsals. Thank you for your understanding.

On Sundays for worship, at the HIGH Community Level masks are required in the sanctuary and narthex during the whole worship service, for the choir.

In the sanctuary, we will follow the same policy that was in place in May when the level was at MEDIUM, namely, wear a mask when processing and recessing from the narthex to the choir loft and back, wear a mask during the entire Communion distribution time, and masks are strongly encouraged throughout the rest of the worship service (but not required).

However, the CDC has relaxed some of the social distancing requirements in recent weeks, and the Council, other leadership, and I have a strong desire to begin the program year with as normal a worship liturgy as possible. So, Holy Communion will once again be offered at the altar for all who would like to receive the sacrament in that way, regardless of CDC Community Level. Also, masks are permitted to be removed for those reading from the lectern or pulpit, which allows for lip reading and better clarity of sound on the microphones.

The vast majority of our in-person worshipers have been voluntarily masking the last few months, so we will not be out of place with what the congregation is doing and expecting. In addition, we have seen members returning in recent weeks who have not been present in-person all pandemic, and (as our Worship & Music chair stated) we wish to do everything possible to help them feel welcome and comfortable to enter the sanctuary and to come forward for Communion. Thank you for helping to lead by your example in this way.

The Council and I will continue to review this policy on a monthly basis and will let you know when there are changes or updates. For example, a drop in the Covid Community Level to LOW would trigger a reassessment and relaxation of requirements, and we anticipate that masks would become entirely optional in the worship service at that point.

Thank you again for your understanding and your support. I look forward to the joy and vitality that our music together brings to the community gathered in worship,

Pastor Chris Carr