

Council Meeting highlights and COVID-19 requirement updates

On 9/21 council met and reviewed the COVID-19 data and state & synod recommendations. No changes were made to our current requirements.

The council wishes to express deep appreciation for the conscientiousness with which so many worship attenders have observed the risk-reduction requirements. It is truly something to celebrate!

Council also discussed what procedures to implement in the case of non-compliance on the part of individuals. It begins with individual and corporate continuing education on the reasons the requirements are important. As a step in that procedure, all in-person worshipers are reminded that our risk-reduction requirements are a social contract that we have made with one another for how we will gather and what we can all expect. Every Sunday there are members, visitors, and paid singers who have only elected to attend because of our emphasis on safety reflected in these requirements. When we all follow the requirements it creates a sense of fairness and unity, and does not distract us from God's presence in Word and Sacrament. So, your observance of the risk-reduction requirements is vitally important in order for us to continue indoor worship with choir and singing and lectors and congregational responses. Persons who do not wish to wear facemasks and remain socially distanced are reminded that outdoor and online worship are options that are available for them in these days. As always, your continued patience and understanding is deeply appreciated.

Council Changes Restrictions – Maintains Masks but Gives Go Ahead for Congregational Singing

Your elected leaders met June 15th and once again the potential relaxing of pandemic restrictions was a topic of lengthy and thoughtful discussion. The council's strong desire is to chart a course forward that allows for positive changes for the largest number of worshipers as we move back toward normal, realizing that they will be unable to please everyone no matter what course of action is taken.

BACKGROUND

Pastor presented information about what other ELCA congregations were doing around Richmond and the Virginia Synod, and it is a wide range. Congregations including Williamsburg and Chesapeake are meeting in person on Sunday 6/20/21 for the first time this year and will be masked but allow singing.

Congregations like Epiphany and Christ, Richmond, have been meeting in person for some weeks with singing and without masks for vaccinated individuals, but Epiphany took a survey indicating they have a very high 98% vaccination status in the congregation attending at this time, and Christ is asking the vaccination question at the entrance door so they know everyone is vaccinated. Muhlenberg in Harrisonburg won't be removing masks until the younger kids can get vaccinated. College Lutheran in Salem introduced a small vaccinated masked choir on 5/16, and recently added congregational singing – still masked. Grace, Winchester is keeping masks but starting to introduce congregational singing this week. Some other congregations have not yet returned to indoor in-person worship. All the clergy respondents to the question continued to

agree that individual congregational context is one of the biggest factors as we each move forward in relaxing requirements. The varying views of our own church membership were also discussed and given full consideration.

DISCUSSION

Our council and pastor believe it is time to continue relaxing the requirements, especially when considering that the number of new daily COVID-19 cases in greater Richmond has been in the single digits for the last four weeks. Council discussed two possibilities for moving forward in relaxing restrictions; those were to keep the distancing in place and relax either (1) the mask wearing for vaccinated individuals once seated in the pews, or (2) the prohibition against congregational singing.

DECISION

After weighing the pros and cons of both courses of action, the unanimous decision of the congregation council was to maintain the current facemask policy for all individuals and to instead relax the requirement against singing by slowly introducing congregational hymns back into the worship service. So, beginning 06/20/21, we will keep masks but allow congregational singing starting with the sending hymn. Anyone who is uncomfortable with having congregational singing is welcome to exit the sanctuary before the sending hymn. In addition, we will move the cantor out of the heat of the bell tower and into the choir loft, and Pastor will also begin chanting the Communion liturgy this Sunday. They also will all remain masked. If the COVID case numbers continue to stay as low as they have been, we will slowly add to the number of things the congregation is singing in the weeks ahead, and a cantor will continue to support us in singing those hymns. Thank you for working together to support the council in their decisions made for the sake of the entire body, both by praying for them and by following the guidelines as outlined.

In addition, please be reminded that outdoor worship is an option that will be provided on the fourth Sunday of each month, and masks are entirely optional for the outdoor service.