

Dear siblings in Christ,

In response to the most recent CDC guidelines, Governor Northam is lifting the mask mandate for those who have been fully vaccinated. In addition, distancing requirements and capacity limits will be lifted on May 28th in Virginia. Following the guidance of the CDC and the Governor, Bishop Goff is also lifting all mask and distancing requirements for the parishes of the diocese. We give thanks for the increasing numbers of fully vaccinated people and for the continued decline in new COVID cases.

May 23rd, The Day of Pentecost, will be our last service outdoors. **On May 30th**, we will hold our first in-door service since the start of the pandemic. These are all significant and welcomed steps in our shared fight against COVID.

There are still many who remain unvaccinated. Children under the age of 12 are not currently eligible. Those who are immunocompromised, undergoing chemotherapy or radiation, pregnant or nursing: doctors are making case by case recommendations on whether or not they should be vaccinated. According to the CDC, they are "still learning how effective and how well the vaccines protect individuals with weakened immune systems, including those who take immunosuppressive medications."

At our last vestry meeting on May 18th, we had a full and open discussion about these most recent updates. We know that people will take this news differently and will have varying comfort levels with this new guidance. The vestry and I want to encourage everyone who is fully vaccinated to consider and make their own determination on mask-wearing and social distancing.

Let me speak for myself as an illustration. I have two young children who are not yet able to be vaccinated. As of the writing of this letter, their schools will continue to require masks and practice social distancing. For this reason, Kim and I have decided, in some situations, we will continue to wear masks. I know of parishioners, family, friends, and colleagues, who are either waiting to receive the vaccine or do not know how effectively it will protect them.

I have made the personal determination, that while I will not be as strict in my mask-wearing, there will still be some situations where a mask is appropriate. I do not know yet what all those situations will be. I will have to feel my way through it. If vaccinations continue to climb and new cases continue to decrease, it will alter my sense of needed caution. I do not make this decision out of fear of contracting COVID for myself. But instead in the scarce chance that I could carry the virus and pass it on to an unvaccinated or higher risk person. As Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:40) For the time being, I will continue to exercise a certain level of caution. I invite you all to pray on this and determine what your needs are.

What this means for The Church of the Epiphany:

- If you are not fully vaccinated, **please wear a mask while in the building and practice social distancing.**

- Each fully vaccinated individual and family will have to choose when they feel wearing a mask is appropriate and when keeping some social distance applies.
- If there is a hymn, we ask that anyone who sings, regardless of vaccination status, **wear a mask while singing.**
- Disposable masks and hand sanitizer will be available at all church functions.
- For the time being, we will be holding only the 10:30 am service.
- For the time being, we will continue to worship with Morning Prayer until the diocese has updated their guidelines around communion, and we can practice it fully and freely.
- We will forgo coffee hour until vaccine levels have risen to a higher rate.
- Ms. Gail and the Sunday School parents have begun talking about regathering in person. They will follow mask and social distancing guidelines. Please contact Ms. Gail if you have a child who is interested in attending Sunday school in person.
- Online services will continue to be offered for those who can not attend worship in person.

The vestry and I will continue to evaluate the situation and make adjustments. If the CDC, Governor, or Bishop give us new directives, we will follow them. Please contact me or a member of the vestry directly if you have any questions, comments, or concerns.

In one of the first sermons I preached to you online, while sitting alone in our empty church, I said, "If we begin and end in love, whatever comes in between will be all right and get us through this time." We have begun this pandemic acting in love, we continue to respond to it in love, and when it is finally over, we will end in love. I know we will all make the best decision for ourselves and our personal situations and will be respectful and supportive of the decisions of others.

In Christ,

The Rev. Andrew Charles Reinholz