

Considerations for Mask Exemption during Indoor Preaching

Post-COVID Re-Entry Group (PRG)

Effective Date: May 15, 2021

During the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone has been required to wear a well-fitting mask while indoors. The CDC and the government released an update for Fully Vaccinated Americans, allowing them to unmask in certain settings.

Our guiding principle, do no harm, has led to the decision to require preachers, like the congregation, to wear a mask at all times while indoors. Fully vaccinated people are less likely to develop serious or life-threatening COVID-19, but about 15% may get infection after full vaccination; when infected, fully vaccinated people tend to transmit infection less often than unvaccinated people. Now that more clergy and congregants have been fully vaccinated, we are considering the appropriateness of allowing preachers to unmask while preaching indoors.

We understand that communication may be impaired by masks. Speakers communicate not just by words but also by facial expressions and other factors. Listeners with hearing difficulties may benefit from reading the lips and observing facial expressions of a speaker. As an example of effective communication, one might recall that the President recently addressed Congress and the nation while unmasked.

Therefore, *we ask churches to start the conversation* to evaluate the circumstances in their local setting and to decide if unmasked indoor preaching is appropriate for their congregation. In doing so, churches will want to consider the following:

1. **Full vaccination of preacher** - Preacher needs to be fully vaccinated as defined by the Center for Disease Control & Prevention, the CDC. Fully vaccinated status means two weeks or longer after the second shot of the Pfizer or Moderna immunization or two weeks or longer after the single immunization with Johnson & Johnson vaccine.
2. **Review COVID related data** - Each church considering the measure of having an unmasked preacher must review:

- a. The true percentage of the worshipping congregation that is fully vaccinated;
- b. the current 7-day COVID-19 test positivity rate (PCR only) in the health district in which the church is located
(<https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/coronavirus/coronavirus/covid-19-in-virginia-testing/>)

As a rule of thumb, a 5% or higher positivity rate has been regarded as indicating such a high level of community infection that it would be unwise to relax non-pharmacologic measures (like masks) for controlling COVID-19 transmission. See

<http://www.jhsph.edu/covid-19/articles/covid-19-testing-understanding-the-percent-positive.html>

3. **Consider extended risks** - What are the risks to those who are unvaccinated or those who are themselves fully vaccinated but have household members who remain at risk? What are the risks to those that cannot be vaccinated, or will not be vaccinated, or remain at risk despite vaccination? What are the risks to children and youth who remain unvaccinated? What about the congregants or visitors whose vaccination status is unknown?
4. **Preventive measures** - What are the other measures we may take to minimize the risk of transmission? Can preachers maintain speaking softly? Can we limit the time of preaching (it has been demonstrated convincingly that transmission may occur indoors without masks during a period as short as five minutes)? Can we assure that the preachers would maintain appropriate distance from the audience? (suggested distance: If 25 feet is required for outdoor unmasked preaching, indoor unmasked preaching should exceed that distance. Does the church's worship space allow for that amount of distancing?) Have ventilation issues in the setting been fully addressed? Will those who may attend be fully educated that, in comparison to masked preaching, unmasked preaching has some increased risk of transmitting the infection? Will those attending

understand that masks are to be worn at all times by everyone other than the pastor? How will the church express that?

5. **Alternatives** - Have you considered alternatives? Outdoor worship is by far the safest option at this point for both the vaccinated and unvaccinated. Have you considered pre-recording the sermon, or preaching by video link to the congregation from another location?



USE YOUR B.R.A.I.N

Thought process tool in making critical decisions

B

BENEFITS

What are the benefits of this decision?
How might it positively impact the church and guests?

R

RISKS

What are the risks of this decision?
How might it negatively impact the church and community?

A

ALTERNATIVES

What are the alternatives to this decision?
Are there any other options?

I

INTUITION

What is our gut telling me about this?

N

NEED MORE TIME/ NOTHING

Do we need more time to think this through?
What happens if we do nothing?

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