

Note from The Rev. Barbara Ballenger: Making Masks Optional

I purchased a new purse recently, and was happy to find it had a pocket that would make it easy for me to pull out a facemask with ease as I moved in and out of buildings. It was a factor that didn't exist for me a few years ago. But today wearing a face mask has become an act of personal safety and care for others. And it has been a challenge as well, as we have struggled to hear one another, recognize one another and read the cues that appear in a smile or frown.

The variables that accompany public health threats like COVID create times that are generally safer for many, and other periods that are much less safe for all. As a faith community we need to make sure our practices are flexible and caring, given the diversity of lives and situations involved.

Responding to the current [low risk COVID status](#) in Montgomery county, the Vestry voted on Tuesday to make wearing masks optional in the building and during liturgies **starting Monday, April 18** -- the day **after** Easter. This will allow us to keep masking precautions in place during our crowded Easter service. And after that we can ease into this new practice as we return to gatherings whose numbers allow more space and air flow for those who attend.

At the same time, we are restoring other practices that were phased out because of COVID precautions, such as the clergy distributing Eucharist, the collection plates making their rounds, and coffee hours occurring after the liturgy. The option of receiving Eucharistic wine in the cup will return after Easter, as well.

The vestry's decision to make mask wearing optional after Easter was based on several factors, including:

- **The results of the parish COVID survey, which had a 47 percent response rate.** Eighty-percent of those who responded said they were likely or very likely to attend in person if masks were optional; 7.7 percent were unlikely to attend and the rest were neither likely nor unlikely. You can read Bob Hartung's full report [here](#).
- **[New CDC COVID guidelines](#) on that set parameters for low, medium and high risk levels in communities.** Determining what practices mark our times of lowest risk give us the ability to adjust our protocols if COVID cases start to rise or new variants appear.
- **Values that reflect who we are as a faith community.** These include care for vulnerable members, consistency with diocesan guidance, consistency with public health guidance, and welcome of new members, ongoing access to liturgy and parish life, and the growth and financial health of our parish.

It was clear that no solution would eliminate risk for all. At the same time no decision is forever fixed, given the flexibility that COVID has demanded of us. So another outcome of the Vestry's COVID conversation was the creation of a COVID advisory committee that would monitor the county risk status, offer guidance on effective COVID practices, and suggest when to tighten or ease our COVID protocols.

The Vestry's decision on Tuesday came after a robust discussion about managing risk, offering a variety of safe options, taking care of our most vulnerable people and living parish life fully in a world where a measure of health precaution will always be with us.

The help of a diocesan grant and generous tech volunteers has provided St. Peter's with the technology to provide live stream options for those who feel safer attending worship and meetings via Facebook or Zoom. Soon the warmer weather will give us more options for creating outdoor worship and meeting spaces for those who will benefit from these even safer options.

Beyond rules, regulations and protocols, however, is our ongoing call as followers of Jesus to act in a way that cares for those around us. While we are in a period of optional mask wearing, our commitment to practices of care must be ongoing. That means that those who can be fully vaccinated and boosted, should do so, as per CDC guidelines. If you have been exposed to COVID or have symptoms of a contagious illness, do wear a mask, keep distance, use hand sanitizer, and stay home if necessary. I, for one, appreciated that I could zoom into my first Vestry meeting so I didn't share my lousy head cold with those gathered in person for the first time.

As Easter approaches and spring unfolds beneath our feet, we are invited to come back to life as a community that is called to witness to our experience of Jesus' love, care, hope and resurrection life. Let us step into this time of transition and return in a spirit of conversation, gratitude, trust and care of one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Please contact myself or one of the warden's below to offer your feedback and ideas as we move forward.

May God bless you as we prepare for Holy Week,

Rev. Barb

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As interim Priest-in-Charge, the Rev. Barbara Ballenger will walk with us this year as St. Peter's creates a profile that reflects the community that God is calling us to be. After that, Rev. Barb and St. Peter's will discern our ongoing future together.