

St. Stephen's COVID-19 masking and protocol update – March 2022

For the past two years, your vestry has consistently followed the recommendations of the CDC, the Diocese, and other medical authorities in establishing protocols, such as asking everyone to wear masks while indoors, social distancing, and sanitizing frequently at church.

This past week the CDC and other authorities, including infection specialist hospital staff, now recommend that, when counties are at “medium” range as we are now, “People may choose to mask at any time. People with symptoms, a positive test, or exposure to someone with COVID-19 should wear a mask.” Your vestry has decided to make masks optional in worship and other church settings. (For further information and CDC updates on infection ratings, see <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/covid-by-county.html>).

We are very grateful that things have come to this point. However, this doesn't mean the pandemic is over. We still ask everyone to follow established protocols such as:

- frequent hand washing, testing, and staying home when sick.
- Quarantine or isolation when necessary (see <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/quarantine-isolation.html> for guidance on when to quarantine or isolate).
- The Embry free testing site is still active in our parking lot for your convenience.
- We continue to urge that everyone who hasn't been updated with vaccines and boosters do so soon as possible.

We acknowledge and respect that some of our church members and friends- especially the health vulnerable- may still have concerns regarding risks of infection. We ask everyone to respect the fact that some people will still choose to wear masks and practice social distancing. So, we also ask that the pews along the back and sides in the sanctuary continue to be reserved for those who choose to be masked and distanced.

This decision also means that communion around the altar rail will again be offered. It will continue to be through intinction and the Priest or Eucharistic Minister will intinct the bread for you for now. So, please continue to indicate by making the dipping motion if you want your bread dipped into the wine, or put your hand out without the dipping motion to receive the bread without the wine. If you prefer a blessing, you may cross your arms over your chest to indicate your wish to receive a blessing instead.

We will once more offer indoor fellowship in the Parish Hall or the Ed Building. We are planning an Easter brunch following our Sunday Easter service this year.

We hope and pray that trends continue to improve. If, however, there is another Covid surge and the CDC resumes recommending masks for all, we reserve the right to again make that request, as disappointing as that may be. (Think of it as kind of like having an umbrella that is brought out when it rains but is kept in the closet otherwise). Our goal continues to be the safety of all. There is no guarantee that what we do mitigates all risks, but we do the best we can with the most reliable information available.

Thank you very much for your patience, understanding, and compassion. It has been long and challenging time for all of us. Keep praying for our medical professionals, for health and healing to all and for a complete end to this pandemic world-wide.

- Your St. Stephen's Vestry and Rector