

WHY WE'RE STILL WEARING MASKS

Pastoring a community through COVID is not easy, and seventeen months into it, we are still living in uncharted territory. As you know, guidelines from the CDC and other agencies are changing with regard to masks; however, there are various complexities even within the guidelines, and when we compare the CDC guidelines with those coming from the World Health Organization, there is reason to move forward cautiously. The CDC has changed its guidelines for mask wearing for those who are fully vaccinated, and we see this reflected in Wegmans and other public settings. However, there are many ways that we are not your average public setting! There is a difference between being in a store (where everyone is moving and the periods of time you share the same “air space” is momentary) and sitting in one place with dozens of others for an hour at a time.

Within the ECC, we also have another resource for informing us when it comes to understanding COVID. At least once a month, we get an update from Don Pachuta who, in addition to be a priest in the ECC, is also an infectious disease doctor who stays very up-to-date on the latest information about COVID, and can then interpret the medical info both into laypersons' terms, but also what it means for faith communities. Don expresses concerns about the Delta variant as well as the rising numbers, and he reminds us that the vaccine may reduce the severity, but it does not mean we will not get COVID. We're also hearing this information coming from the Olympics, and we've also had it happen within our community. A member of our community, **who has not yet returned to church** but who is fully vaccinated, recently tested positive for COVID, and while the illness may be more “mild” because of being vaccinated, the member definitely has struggled with the debilitating impacts of the symptoms. And don't forget - even those who are asymptomatic run the risk of Long Haul Syndrome as a

result of infection. One recent medical article I saw estimated as much as 20% of fully vaccinated people who test positive for COVID develop Long Haul Syndrome.

Finally, as we consider our mask requirement, I invite us to focus for a minute on our [Guiding Principles and Values](#). As you know, at MMC one of the values that we hold most dear is the value of inclusiveness. It is our belief that being inclusive applies to people feeling safe and comfortable in our liturgies as well as our activities, and this involves minimizing the risks for the most vulnerable among us. Being an inclusive, welcoming community means that our sanctuary must feel **as safe as possible for EVERYONE** who enters. This includes those who may be medically at risk as well as our families and children who do not even have the possibility of being vaccinated yet. Of course, inclusiveness and loving our neighbor as ourselves are values that warm our hearts as a community, but they also have growing edges, and at times, upholding our values calls us to be “uncomfortable.”

So, while we continue to revisit this conversation every month within church leadership groups, the bottom line is that we are not changing our mask requirements at this time. We may be fully vaccinated, we may be able to drop our masks in other settings, we might not feel the need for a mask, but our brothers and sisters who are at risk need us to be conscious of their safety. At some point, this will change but we're not there yet, so for all of these reasons, and in continued consultation with the Board of Trustees, we are proceeding with caution one loving step at a time. Thank you for your support and understanding!

With deep love and care for all of you,

Bishop Denise