

Re-opening Task Force Recommendations – August 25, 2021

First Presbyterian Church – Gainesville, GA

After careful consideration, the FPC Reopening Task Force recommends the following changes to our current guidelines for gathering together as we continue to manage the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Effective immediately, masks and physical distance (six feet) will be mandatory/required for all who gather indoors at First Presbyterian Church, with the exception of soloist singers while singing and worship leaders while speaking during worship (provided that they are sufficiently distanced from the congregation). *Rationale: Positive cases in our community (as indicated by Northeast Georgia Health System) continue to rise. At a panel discussion for local clergy and faith leaders last week, NGHS appealed to local churches for help in stopping the spread of the Covid-19 Delta variant. They recommended masks and physical distance, among other mitigation measures. NGHS is forecasting a peak of this “fourth wave” sometime in mid to late September, and expect it to be a higher peak than the previous high peak last winter. FPC has had positive cases affect programs and events. In the past week, FPC has had the following positive Covid-19 cases:*
 - *One childcare employee (vaccinated, symptomatic). By the luck of the teacher rotation, she was not in church on Sunday, August 22 (the Sunday just before she tested positive). If she had been present, it likely would have led to multiple quarantines due to close contact exposure, and run the risk of FPC not having enough staff available to open the children’s wing on Sunday, August 29th and Sunday, September 5th.*
 - *One member of our Audio/Visual team in charge of live-streaming our services. He is currently in quarantine for two weeks, leaving Ronny Childs as the only A/V employee in the control room on Sunday mornings during that time. If Ronny should become unavailable, we will not be able to live-stream our services.*
 - *One member of our WOW kitchen crew, plus another member of our WOW kitchen crew currently quarantined due to close contact exposure. A caterer with whom they work is also Covid-positive and in quarantine. These positive cases and resulting quarantines mean that we are no longer able to begin our WOW programs on September 8th as planned.*
 - *One student positive case in our Child Development Center, resulting in the temporary closure of one Pre-K classroom.*

Requiring masks and physical distance indoors at FPC is one effective way to help stop the spread of Covid-19 in our community, and give us the highest chance of carrying out church programs and functions without interruption due to positive cases or resulting quarantines.

Other considerations of the Task Force:

- In the Child Development Center, 73% of employees are vaccinated (about ten employees are not). Many wear masks during the day in their classrooms. The mother of one of our students is a nurse at NGMC, and has reached out to Brooke Lowe about having a vaccine clinic for our CDC staff. There have also been questions about whether we would make this a church-wide event.
- It was also noted that cases and hospitalizations at Northeast Georgia Health System continue to rise due to the Delta variant.
- The Task Force discussed our situation at FPC, recognizing the positive effects of our current individual responsibility-focused policy (masks and mitigation measures optional, left to individuals). The report from one Sunday School class indicated that it was well-attended, and only two present wore masks, though the class went well and maintains a positive

climate. However, it was also noted that in-person attendance in two other Sunday School classes had dropped in the past week, with a corresponding number of participants choosing to join virtually rather than gather in-person. Additionally, *in-person* attendance for both worship services was down slightly this past Sunday. Our total participation remained consistent at about 350 participants by our estimates, with a higher participation online (a reversal of previous weeks, when slightly more people participated in-person).

- The Task Force discussed at-length the distinction between masks and distance being *highly encouraged* vs. *mandatory*. An initial motion to update our current policy to *highly encourage* masks and distance was discussed and passed unanimously by the Task Force. However, during discussion it was apparent that some on the Task Force preferred *mandatory* mitigation measures. A motion and subsequent discussion on the pros/cons of *mandatory* language then continued. Challenges of mandatory language were identified to be 1) the difficulty in enforcement of such a requirement, 2) the likelihood of some in our membership staying home instead of coming to worship if masks are required, and 3) the certainty that at least some in attendance would decline to wear a mask even if they are made mandatory (which we saw in the winter). Benefits of mandatory language were identified to be 1) a higher likelihood that church programs and events could continue as scheduled, 2) a more effective response to the NGHS call for help in reducing the spread of Covid-19, and 3) the likelihood that some in our membership would attend in-person services only if masks and distancing are mandatory. After thorough discussion, the Task Force recognized that the final determination belongs with the Session, but in a split vote recommended *mandatory* language over *highly encouraged*.
- It should be noted that the Task Force received fifteen pieces of written communication from church members in the past week. All were congenial in tone. Some appealed to the Task Force and Session not to “take steps backward” into more strict mitigation measures, advocating for our current policy of leaving any mitigation measures up to the individual. Others appealed to the Task Force and Session to consider stronger requirements as an act of love or Christian witness, advocating for mandatory masks and distancing. It is clear that our church is full of faithful people who want what is best for FPC. However, and unsurprisingly, there is strong disagreement over what that is.

Prayerfully submitted to the Session for consideration and approval on August 25, 2021 by the FPC Re-opening Task Force.