

COVID-19 Mask Request

This document is focussed on the specific issue of wearing masks.

With ongoing COVID-19 concerns, the JHC Board of Elders feels that there is a need for us a leadership group to provide a clear explanation of our church's position regarding masks. During the early days of the pandemic, a Health and Safety Committee was formed at JHC. At that time, it was generally accepted that COVID-19 was primarily a physical health issue; as such, our Board deferred to the guidance and recommendations from the Health and Safety Committee.

However, as time has gone by, there has been an increasing sense of tension amongst various groups, with differing opinions on the response to COVID-19. In the current situation, the Board senses an increased potential for division and conflict within our church. The pandemic, and our collective response to it, has become an issue with the potential to impact our unity and spiritual health.

As of 25-August-2021, the BC Provincial Health Officer (PHO) reintroduced a mask mandate for public spaces. Under this current Order, religious gatherings are exempt from the mask mandate.

As a church, we see three potential responses to the current public mask mandate:

- Option 1 We could claim the exemption for religious gatherings, and be silent on the issue of masks, allowing everyone to act as they see fit.
- Option 2 We could ask that people who are not fully vaccinated wear masks, while allowing fully vaccinated people to not wear masks.
- Option 3 We could ask everyone to wear masks.

As we have worked through the decision of which response is most appropriate for us as a church, we have tried to consider the issue from several perspectives.

Considerations on Option 1

Although we are exempt from the mask mandate, we view our church building as a public place. From that perspective, we feel that the same health concerns which are present at other public places (such as coffee shops, restaurants, malls, etc.) are also present at our church building. In turn, it seems appropriate that the same health measures in effect at other public places should also be in effect at our church building.

With the case numbers rising in recent weeks, and remaining at elevated levels, we also feel that now is a time to make prudent decisions from a health perspective, as opposed to relaxing our response to the ongoing pandemic.

Further, we feel that non-believers within our community may have a negative view of the church if we were to forego masking; they would likely ask why they are required to wear masks in public,

while the church is not required to do the same. We are concerned this may hinder our witness within the community.

Considerations on Option 2

We see this approach as having a polarizing effect, with the potential to cause division within our church. It would split JHC attendants into two groups, with the separation being immediately visible.

It also has the potential to cause stress and discomfort for various groups of people.

Some people within our congregation who are not currently vaccinated may prefer to keep their vaccination status private. If we were to adopt this approach, these people would be “outed.”

Some people within our congregation are vaccinated, but have other high-risk individuals in their lives. Even though they are vaccinated, they may want to wear masks. Under this approach, if these individuals chose to wear a mask, they may be concerned that others would think they are not vaccinated, which could potentially cause stress, especially considering this is a group who would likely be quite strongly in support of vaccinations.

Some people within our congregation are not vaccinated, and do not want to wear masks. This approach would not provide any benefit to this group. However, they may be tempted to not wear masks, given that it would be on the “honour-system.” This has the potential for further conflict between attendees.

There are also individuals with an increased risk of serious health effects from COVID-19, who still desire to participate in gatherings at the church. It may cause distress for these people to see a large number of individuals in attendance not wearing masks, and wondering if some of those individuals have not been vaccinated.

We realize that there are many other groups of people, including those who have been fully vaccinated and would enjoy the freedom of not wearing a mask under this approach. We recognize that not every individual situation has been listed above. However, we have identified that there are certain people in our congregation who could be negatively impacted under this approach.

Considerations on Option 3

Under this approach, we would be forfeiting the mask exemption we have as a religious gathering. We realize that this approach could be perceived as being excessive, particularly for individuals who have been fully vaccinated and would prefer not to wear masks.

However, this approach would help avoid many of the potential stressors identified under Option 2. It also seems to be prudent from a health perspective.

In addition to our own thoughts and opinions, we have also looked to scripture for a Biblical perspective on how we should be responding. Romans 14 states the following:

14 Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. 2 One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. 3 The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. 4 Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

5 One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. 6 Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. 7 For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. 8 If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. 9 For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

10 You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister^[a]? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. 11 It is written:

*"As surely as I live," says the Lord,
'every knee will bow before me;
every tongue will acknowledge God.'"^[b]*

12 So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

13 Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. 14 I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. 15 If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died. 16 Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. 17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, 18 because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.

19 Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. 20 Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. 21 It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.

22 So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. 23 But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

This passage tells us that we should not cling to our personal freedoms, to act as we please, if those actions will cause harm to other believers.

Recognizing that our response has an impact on regular attendees, visitors, our surrounding community, and the staff employed at JHC, we need to consider our response from an organizational perspective. It is

not just a personal matter; we have a responsibility to consider how our decisions and actions will impact all involved.

In light of the practical considerations discussed above, and in line with the message presented in Romans 14, we feel that the most appropriate response for JHC is to ask everyone to wear a mask inside our church building. This is not a decision based on fear; it is a decision based on thoughtful consideration of the options before us, as well as our reflections on what we see in the scriptures.

Finally, we are aware that situation surrounding COVID-19 will continue to change as time goes on. As a church, we will continue to adapt to these changing conditions, and will modify our actions as appropriate.