

AN OVERVIEW OF PANDEMIC RESTRICTIONS AND AN UPDATE ON REGATHERING

The past six months have been different than expected – and different than any of us could have ever predicted – on so many levels. The following summary is a look back at how we arrived at this unique place, together with an overview on how we are continuing to navigate these challenges at MBC.

THE NATIONAL SHUTDOWN

On March 16, 2020, in response to a global pandemic, the White House imposed significant international travel restrictions and implemented a comprehensive domestic shutdown for fifteen days. On April 2, the White House extended the national shutdown and implemented “30 Days to Stop the Spread,” a coordinated nationwide plan to fight the coronavirus.

The national plan, implemented by the federal Coronavirus Task Force and led by Vice President Mike Pence, highlighted the need for federal restrictions across the country that included mandatory quarantines (“stay at home”), mandatory business closures, limits on gathering sizes (initially 10, then later increased to 50), and observance of social distancing in indoor public spaces. The federal plan did not include a mask mandate.

A PHASED REOPENING

On April 30, as the national 30-Day plan was expiring, Vice-President Mike Pence indicated a shift in the national response to the pandemic. Rather than continuing the national shutdown, the Coronavirus Task Force instead provided guidelines to the states on reopening, with many of the same recommendations on gathering sizes, social distancing, and business restrictions. When asked about the need for continuing national mandates, Vice President Pence noted the following:

“What we want to do is empower governors and local officials to give the guidance to the people in those communities that’s most appropriate for their circumstances.”

In the late spring and early summer, as governors began to implement a phased reopening of their communities, a number of disagreements began to arise over the “right” way to reopen the country. One of the most heated disagreements focused on the need for mask mandates, with the WHO and other international organizations first recommending against widespread use of masks, then changing course. Over the summer, the White House and the Coronavirus Task Force clarified the federal position on masks:

“We’re asking that everybody, when you’re not able to socially distance, wear a mask. Whether you like the mask or not, they have an impact. They have an effect. And we need everything we can get...

... I view it this way: anything that can potentially help is a good thing. I have no problem. I carry it. I wear it. You saw me wearing it a number of times, and I’ll continue.” -President Donald Trump

“This Administration believes people should wear masks wherever it is called for by state and local authorities.” -Vice President Mike Pence

As the federal government affirmed their recommendations on a phased reopening with restrictions, and as leadership for the reopening effort shifted to state and local governments, Virginia Governor Ralph Northam and Maryland Governor Larry Hogan each adopted their own version of the recommended federal guidelines. Each state also enacted a mask mandate for indoor public spaces as recommended by the Coronavirus Task Force. Both Virginia and Maryland also continued social distancing and gathering-size restrictions from the national shutdown, with a phased-down approach to restrictions over time.

There are nuances to these different approaches in each jurisdiction, but the basic approach has remained the same for months now: **all of the jurisdictions where MBC gatherings take place remain part of a federally-endorsed, locally-led, bipartisan pandemic response effort with universal agreement on the need for social distancing, restrictions on gathering sizes, and masks in indoor public spaces.**

THE MBC APPROACH

At this time, we are not aware of any government authority – Republican or Democrat - in MBC’s governing local, state, or federal agencies who have taken a position against the wearing of masks and/or against social distancing in this stage of our country’s ongoing response to the pandemic. We likewise have not encountered a sitting public health official who is against social distancing or masks. We certainly know many individuals who are against the wearing of masks for any number of reasons, but biblically these individual expressions of freedom do not carry the same weight as the uniform pronouncements from our official authorities.

Specifically, Romans 13 calls us as followers of Christ to be subject to our governing authorities, for God Himself has placed each one of them in their positions of authority. Even as we apply this principle, though, we know that earthly governments are not our highest or ultimate authority. We are accountable first and foremost to God, and this truth has controlled each and every one of our decisions thus far.

In the earliest days of the outbreak, we complied with the federal government’s national shutdown. When our nation’s coordinated response shifted to a phased reopening in each state, we implemented a number of new protocols and restarted our in-person services. Even as we adopted these new protocols, though, we have continued to affirm from the beginning of the outbreak (and still affirm today) that the government’s recommended restrictions are not our primary consideration. We are not operating out of fear, nor are we abandoning our biblical principles.

Instead, our prayerful approach since the reopening process began has been to consistently ask what those in our congregation who are in the highest risk categories might need in order to gather with us in-person, and then we have done our best to put those things into practice. We know that many of our members will continue to join us from home, just as we know that many at MBC would also prefer to attend without any restrictions at all. Again, though, our approach is not based on any one group’s preferences. Instead, we are working diligently to make this a place where all of our can people can join us if they are comfortable doing so.

To date – and even with these new protocols in place – we also want to highlight that we have had available seats at every gathering since the outbreak started for any MBC member (or even casual attenders) who might have wanted to attend with us. In short, not a single person has been restricted from gathering with us on Sunday mornings or at our outdoor services,

although it is of course a very different experience than before the pandemic. And if/when we reach capacity in our current approach, we have steps in place to increase our ability to gather together across all of our locations.

We do know that all of this is far from ideal, but we also trust that the Lord is accomplishing His purposes in us and through us just as He has promised. As we continue to work diligently to lead and shepherd, we are also striving to improve our approach and make it as clear and easy as possible for everyone to connect with the body of Christ here. Our new Get Connected page will launch next week with a clear registration link for Sunday morning attendance. We are also launching a number of new classes and group opportunities, including one mid-week offering from our Lead Pastor. And there are additional connection opportunities available at each location.

As always, we are also continuing to monitor each and every update in our country's response to the global pandemic. We note every update from our authorities, and of course we monitor other churches as well, including those in jurisdictions where the government may be actively targeting church gatherings. We are blessed that this has not yet occurred in Virginia and Maryland, but again we will continue to monitor all of these new developments.

As soon as there is a change that allows us to safely expand our gatherings, we will enthusiastically get that word out to everyone at MBC. Please continue to monitor your emails from us, and please look for additional announcements at the end of each service on Sunday morning. As we have said from the beginning, we truly cannot wait until that day!

If you have any questions at all, please do let us know.

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