



November 2022

Dear friends,

Our masking survey is complete, and we are now ready to share with you the results. We'll begin by sharing a bit about the results and then share what decisions those results have helped the Church Council to shape.

First, thank you so much to everyone who took the time to complete the survey. In particular, many of you offered comments, explanations and personal insights with care, grace and understanding for what we know many recognize as a complicated topic to navigate as a community with over 400 people. Every movement of the church during the pandemic has been taken with a desire to provide for people's physical and emotional safety while also seeking to embrace our life together in the most joyous ways possible.

The purpose of this survey wasn't simply to gain a better sense of church opinion on going mask optional. Equally, our purpose was to ascertain the care with which the congregation would move forward *were* we to embrace a mask optional policy.

The results from the survey, gathered from 125 people, are these:

- 84.6% of respondents (105 people) were generally in favor of embracing a "mask optional" policy, with 67.7% (84 people) answering simply "yes," and 16.9% (21) sharing a "yes, with these exceptions" response. Exceptions listed skewed heavily in the direction of cautionary statements and encouragements being made related to colds and staying home. Another exception listed by several people had to do with considering adaptation when entering times of greater infection rates. Other exceptions centered around concerns for singing, providing a masked-only section of the sanctuary and considering going mask optional at all times except worship.
- To our question pertaining to individual continued masking behaviors/choices in a "mask optional" environment, 25% of respondents indicated that they plan to continue wearing masks in the church for the foreseeable future, and 60.5% responded that they expect to sometimes mask and sometimes unmask as COVID numbers in Seattle wax and wane. Note that together, these two responses constitute 85.5% of respondents intending to engage masking as they feel needed to care for themselves and others. 9.7% of respondents (12) indicated that they plan to unmask if we engage a mask optional policy.

- To our question pertaining to other responsive behavior/choices in a mask optional environment, 39.3% (42 people) indicated they would reduce their in-person attendance during periods of greater COVID infection rates. *Note: This matches with our lived experience during the Omicron wave in late December 2021 through January 2022.*
- A clear commitment to staying home or masking if sick or experiencing symptoms related to colds or COVID was shared. To the question, “Should the church become “mask optional,” would you stay home or mask when experiencing symptoms that could get others sick or make them think they have COVID, 97.6% responded “yes.” Further evaluating the question, we believe a misreading or misunderstanding of the question yielded the three “no’s.”
- To our questions about vaccination and boosters, 100% of 122 who answered indicated that they are vaccinated. 98.4% of that 122 have also received at least one booster. 86.1% of that 122 indicated that they had or would (within the next month) receive the bivalent booster, and 98.4% of 122 indicated that they would continue to receive boosters as they became available.
- Seven people indicated they would attend less often if a mask optional policy were engaged, and eight indicated they would attend more often. Though there were ten responses in an early question seeming to indicate persons would not attend worship if we became “mask optional,” we believe this number was inflated by an unclear indication to choose “N/A” if regularly worshipping from home. This assumption is supported by a later response indicating that three individuals (not ten) would no longer attend in-person worship in a mask optional environment.

Based on these responses, the Church Council has decided upon the following policy change, beginning church-wide November 27 (the first Sunday in Advent):

"Beginning November 27 (and earlier for musical ensembles in practice sessions) Fauntleroy Church will engage a mask optional policy at all times except during periods where Seattle is experiencing a high level of COVID cases. Additional actions to care for the congregation will be engaged as felt necessary and warranted." (motion passed with 8 yays, 1 nay, 2 absent)

With this motion, Fauntleroy Church will move to a mask optional policy for all church worship, events and activities except during periods when the Seattle area community level of COVID transmission becomes high/red. Presently, we are watching the King County Public Health community level of transmission for this measurement.

This decision isn't simply based on the majority of “yes” responses. Perhaps of greater influence on this decision was the care we felt clearly expressed in survey responses. In particular, three things provided some assurance of this care: 1) the high percentage of congregants who have received vaccination and boosters that reduce the risk of severe COVID, 2) the high degree of continued care individuals expect to make in their choices around masking, attendance and other engaged behavior, and 3) willingness expressed to engage some additional actions to care for one another that are providing shape to this mask optional decision.

Listening to the congregation, we have decided to engage these actions alongside a mask optional policy:

- We will continue to provide masks for those who forget theirs and would like one.
- Though we will state that we are “mask optional,” we will remind people that masking in groups is the best way to reduce transmission of COVID.

- We will continue providing blanket requests for those with cold or cold-like symptoms to either stay home or mask.
- Contact tracing will continue for worship. We will reduce our use of paper by asking you to sign in on lines of the same sheet.
- We will create a masks-only section at the back of the sanctuary, furthest from the sanctuary doors (the side with less traffic). We do wish to disclose that it is not clear to us that air flow in the sanctuary will provide those in this section with greater protection. That said, we recognize that immediate proximity to masked-only individuals could provide some reduction in exposure to virus loads that could sicken you.
- We will continue to utilize MERV-13 filters in the sanctuary, chapel and fellowship hall.
- We will continue to normalize masking while respecting the decisions of some to unmask.
- Recognizing the power of a church policy over the policy of other organizations, we will cautiously refrain from saying that masking is “optional but encouraged” or “optional but strongly recommended” for reasons of avoiding faith-related guilt influencing decisions. We trust that our congregation will carefully weigh how they individually engage the policy, weighing the opportunities of unmasking and the protections of masking with care, wherever they land.

One final note: as we have turned into November, we have heard from a few people concerned for COVID numbers that are ticking up in certain areas of the world. Additionally, a few people expressed concern for timing in the survey around beginning this mask optional policy just as we are entering flu season. While we acknowledge that ideally, we could ease into a mask optional policy by engaging it in the spring, we also acknowledge that COVID-19 is now endemic. With vaccinations available to all but those under 6 months of age, with bivalent boosters now available for ages five and up, with the extremely high rate of individuals vaccinated and boosted at Fauntleroy Church, and with the high degree of planned self-regulation indicated by survey respondents, we believe it is time to take this next step.

We recognize that some may disagree with this decision, just as others have disagreed with the decision to keep masks on for as long as we have. We pray for understanding and graciousness in the midst of that disagreement. And as we turn into our Advent season with a mask optional policy, we hope you each and all feel the cautious care with which others step forward.

The mask optional policy will begin church-wide Sunday, November 27. For reasons of practicing toward the Advent season and Christmas concerts, the church choir and ensembles will embrace a mask optional policy at practices immediately upon notification.

With care,

Your Fauntleroy Church Council