

RESPONSE TO GOVERNOR YOUNGKIN'S EXECUTIVE ORDER ON FACE MASKS

INTRODUCTION

Governor Youngkin, on January 12, 2022, issued a sweeping executive order addressing the use of face masks in the Commonwealth of Virginia. In his order, he attempted to justify his decision to terminate legal requirements use of masks in schools, leaving the authority on such use in the hands of parents. In truth, developments since that order have reduced the need for the order. Nonetheless, it is on the record and the population of Virginia is reacting to this order in a variety of ways.

The issue of when, why, and how to employ face masks has generated extensive and divisive reactions. Politics have driven much of the discussions and animosity concerning this issue. Nonetheless, **it is a life and death issue**. Therefore, we must pay careful attention to how we respond, particularly as we discharge our duties as spiritual leaders to the members of our congregations. Given the ebb and flow of the COVID-19 pandemic – due both to its ability to morph into numerous variants and the success of various vaccines developed to counter it – governmental edicts are becoming less important. On the other hand, our personal actions are becoming more and more meaningful factors in our ability to counter this dangerous disease.

Maybe, the most important aspect of the overall flow of events is that now we may well have to acknowledge that COVID-19 will not go away. It is well on its way to becoming **endemic** – a continuous threat to public health – not too very different from influenza – requiring an annual vaccination to ensure proper protection.

WHAT THE SCIENCE SAYS AND WHY WE SHOULD PAY ATTENTION

We should pay attention to what the scientists (read Center for Disease control) tell us – even when they seem to change their positions as new information is collected. We must understand that scientific assessments are always a snapshot in time – and will always be refined as more information is discovered. In addition, **scientists always report what the data tells them – with appropriate caveats to acknowledge their uncertainties**. That means, they want us to know – before we act upon their findings that there will always be exceptions to the rule, so to speak.

That is why we should not stop at the general assessments being presented. We should pay careful attention to supplementary insights they provide. Scientists can provide the background information that led to their conclusions – as well as providing estimates on how things will progress in the future – based on their collective research. The key action on our parts should be

to continue to proceed with caution, because the dangers of this pandemic will be with us for a long time.

Scientists are warning us that we may well have to live with Covid-19 for the long term – just as we do with influenza now. **This means that the precautions needed to control Covid-19 and its variants will be necessary – even though they may be inconvenient.** As noted earlier, we must come to grips with the reality that this pandemic is morphing into an endemic. That means that we can anticipate needing periodic vaccine boosters just as we need annual Flu shots. That also means that those who choose not to take the appropriate shots will be betting that they will survive the risks of getting the disease in the same manner that some of us risk getting the Flu by not taking the “flu” vaccine.

Simply put, the scientists give us the best information on the true threat that Covid-19 poses to us – whether we choose to listen to them and heed their advice or not. In fact, **when we choose to disregard their advice, we unnecessarily set ourselves up for death.**

WHAT POLITICIANS AND OTHER NON-SCIENTISTS SAY AND WHETHER WE SHOULD PAY ATTENTION TO THEM

Any time we hear politicians, we must consider the source – and press them for their sources.

Politicians – whether liberal or conservative – pay more attention to polls and their political priorities than to what the scientists are saying. We must remember that COVID-19 is a scientific challenge first – not a civic or political problem, except when the politicians inject themselves into the dynamic surrounding this pandemic.

However, politicians have injected themselves and create much the chaotic reactions we are encountering. Given this situation, those of us hearing them articulate COVID-19 related policies must keep their priorities in mind. In a nutshell, we must constantly be alert to their political goals, and how those goals are influencing their policy statements. **Their political goals drive their statements and actions far more than their concern for public welfare.**

We must also remind ourselves that the people in this country have short attention spans and little patience. Consequently, they want simple solutions and will tolerate only short-term sacrifices. Therefore, they will be willing to constrain themselves for only a short period of time. After that, they want to **“get on with their lives.”** That means the people of this country are looking for a quick fix at minimal inconvenience.

HOW SHOULD THE FAITH COMMUNITY RESPOND TO COVID – 19 AND MASK MANDATE ISSUES

If we understand the strengths and limitations that come along with the scientists – as well as the caveats we must consider when listening to the politicians – then those of us who are supposed to provide leadership to the faith community need to apply some additional inputs before we try to advise our members. Our task is to provide advice that incorporates spiritual influences – i.e. the

word of God – as we provide our responses to our congregants and others who seek spiritually based guidance.

As we respond, we should keep the counsel from the scriptures in the forefront of our minds. For example, Proverbs 14:15-18; 25-26 gives us sage insight by warning us – *“The simple believeth every word: but the prudent man looketh well to his going.”* In other words, before acting on claims, or recommendations from any source – we need to investigate and validate the information we are hearing. Moreover, those of us who have responsibilities as Christian leaders need to use our **“good sense”** and steer clear of **“conventional wisdom”** – which often has proven to be unwise.

In fact, as we deal with those whose impatience and frustration with vaccination requirements and mask mandates or advisories may lead them into risky behaviors, we must remind them that **inconveniences often accompany solid principle-based precautions that end up saving lives.** Again, this same passage from Proverbs informs us by noting – *“A wise man feareth, and departeth from evil: but the fool rageth, and is confident.”* It goes even farther and tells us to avoid letting our tempers get out of control as we react to precautionary measures aimed at saving our lives – telling us – *“He that is soon angry dealeth foolishly: and a man of wicked devices is hated.”*

Finally, we must remain calm and keep our heads – our minds – under control and be certain that any decisions we make on opening our churches and conducting face to face worship services should factor in all the available valid data – and the general health of our members – before we embark upon actions to expand our church operations in ways that may increase our members’ exposure to the potential spread of the COVID-19 viruses. More importantly, **we should avoid the temptation to open up our facilities just because we want to get back to the practices that we – the congregational leaders – enjoyed for our own reasons.**

We need to control our desires for the interactive dynamics of the worship services that made them **“come alive”** – the physical embraces, the singing, the person to person connections, the things that we used to take for granted. As much as we want things to get back to the way they used to be, **we must be both pragmatic and realistic.** We must admit that COVID-19 has changed the paradigms under which we have lived for so long. Once those paradigms have changed – and they have – we can never go back to the **“way things used to be.”**

We must develop and learn to embrace new ways to worship together, while still protecting those who are most vulnerable among us. This means we must be willing to continue **“virtual”** services – however we do them – while also providing opportunities for personal interaction in our worship centers. Those **services in our worship centers must always focus on safety first** – following the sensible guidelines provided by scientific experts. If we do things this way, we will again heed the words of Proverbs 14, where we are told – *“The simple inherit folly: but the prudent are crowned with knowledge.”* Then, we will be able to live up to the counsel of Proverbs 14:26 which notes – *“In the fear of the LORD is strong confidence: and his children shall have a place of refuge.”*

Therefore, as we advise our members how to react to the Governor’s Executive Order Number Two (2022) and Order of Public Health Emergency One – dated and signed by the Governor on 15 January 2022 – we should use our words carefully. One way of speaking to this order and the continuously evolving circumstances concerning the status of COVID-19 reactions follows.

Although we prefer the use of masks indoors, we understand the challenges associated with enforcing a mask policy – especially for the younger age groups and those who are skeptical about their overall effectiveness. We also understand that if such policies are not properly enforced, we will see them become ineffective. However, we also believe if masks are optional, school districts, businesses, and religious organizations should have the authority to reenforce the mandate in the event of COVID spikes/resurgence in their specific areas. We also believe prevention measures should be specifically notated and standardized across all schools and religious facilities.

Unfortunately, the Executive Order’s last Directive (#6) on prevention is a long list of generic and optional measures which reads as a 'catch all' clause. If masks are made optional, implementation of additional preventative measures should be mandatory, funding permitted. Nonetheless, **Religious facilities should always be most protective of the most vulnerable participants – children and the elderly – who happen to be the heart of many of the congregations in NVBA.** We might be wise to follow one of the driving policies embraced by the medical profession – **“First do no harm.”**

**COMMISSION ON CIVIC AND SOCIAL ACTIONS
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