



St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

February 22, 2022

Lent 2022 marks two years since we went from life as we knew it to something completely different—but we hope and believe it also marks the turning of a corner onto the path towards normalcy.

As we've announced previously, the leadership of St. Stephen's Church continues to adjust health and safety guidelines in response to the changing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We also know that people are weary not only of various restrictions, but eager to be together in person. Nowhere is this truer than in our community of faith.

With the waning of the Omicron surge we believe we are in place to adjust our approach.

While we've been offering in-person worship for nearly a year, and Sunday morning formation for many months (with some pauses), we have not been holding some of the fellowship events that the people of St. Stephen's cherish and rely on.

Beginning Shrove Tuesday, March 1, we will change our mask policy. Masks are preferred and appreciated, but not required.

Vested worship leaders—clergy, choir, vergers, acolytes, lay ministers—will continue to wear masks during worship for now. Members of the congregation will not have to wear masks, however.

The first indoor worship services we'll hold using these new guidelines will be our Ash Wednesday services on March 2.

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We will **also permit gatherings in the Large Fellowship Hall**. The Women's Forum will begin meeting there Tuesday, March 1.

An exception will be the Sunday Forum. Holding the forum in the church means that we can livestream it for those who do not attend in person

Perhaps most welcome of all, we will resume parish suppers on Wednesday, March 9. The Wonderful Wednesdays supper will return, as will the Sunday Community Supper on Sunday, March 13. In both cases, we will offer both indoor and outdoor seating, weather permitting. But since indoor seating will now be available, we will not need to cancel parish suppers because of rain (or snow).

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Meetings will be permitted in the parish house, with prior reservations. (Call the parish office at 804.288.2867 to reserve space.)

We've recently resumed our Sunday formation offerings for children and youth, and those will continue.

We're grateful to be in a position to continue the process of re-opening just as Lent begins. Several Lenten offerings are planned and you can read about those in the forthcoming edition of our **Seasons of the Spirit** magazine, the weekly printed **Spirit** newsletter, the weekly **eSpirit** newsletter, and on our Web site at ststephensRVA.org/lent.

We know that for many in our community, these measures will be happy news—and that for others, the knowledge that not everyone will be masked will be a cause for concern and perhaps even a reason to stay away. This has been one of the most difficult things about this pandemic. Please know that we are aware of differing feelings and comfort levels in our church family, and we respect them. We will continue to offer livestreamed services and hope that, for now, this will be a way for those staying home to feel connected.

We don't know where the pandemic will take us, but we may need to prudently adjust our strategies as circumstance change, as we have done throughout this time.

SUMMARY

Masks: Beginning March 1, individuals may choose whether or not to wear masks indoors in church or the parish house. Vested worship leaders will continue to wear masks for some time.

Indoor gatherings: Meetings, including larger ones, will now be permitted in the parish house. Group leaders/organizers must reserve space in advance by calling the parish office at 803.288.2867.

Meals and receptions: Parish suppers will resume March 9 (Wonderful Wednesdays) and March 13 (Sunday Community Suppers), with seating available indoors and, weather permitting, outdoors.

Receptions will be permitted (space must be reserved in advance).

Sunday Forum: While the Large Fellowship Hall is once again open for gatherings, we will continue to hold the Sunday Forum in the church to permit livestreaming.

Other livestreaming: We will continue to livestream Sunday services at 11:15 a.m., 5:30 p.m., and 8 p.m., for the benefit of those who are not comfortable being indoors with large groups at this time.