**Richmond Park Church Covid Road Map**

This past year and half has been difficult for everyone across the world. There have been restrictions placed in all areas of our lives. This includes in the life of the church. I have been so pleased to see how we have responded with grace and mutual respect at RPC. We have also been respectful of the rules set by government, despite the frustrations and difficulties. The number of times I felt myself empathizing with folk in church, as they have pointed out some of the inconsistencies in the rules. ‘If they can do this, why can’t we do that’ etc. With the confirmation of phase four on Monday, we have thankfully been given the freedom to think through and implement our own guidelines.

**Considerations**

There is clearly some mixed messaging in the current government announcement. On the one hand, all restrictions are lifted, but on the other, we still need to be careful and exercise personal responsibility. This has made our plans to move back to normal a little more nuanced. However, I do feel we can move forward confidently towards a greater degree of normality. I think there are at least four reasons for this, coupled with the announcement from the government.

1. **The importance of gathering**- We know that God’s word places a priority on God’s people meeting together. Therefore, at each point the government have relaxed the rules RPC has leaned into it. The government themselves have acknowledged the importance of religious freedom, giving churches freedoms not afforded to other organisations or sections of society. How much more should we appreciate and prioritise our meeting together moving forward with these new freedoms.
2. **Wider opening of society**- When we start to think of what other parts of society are opening up, it gives us more confidence to push towards normality. When we consider crowded night clubs, full concert halls and packed sport venues, amongst many others being given the green light, how much more, us as a church. We have a large airy building with plenty of space to move around and interact.
3. **Successful vaccination program**- It was encouraging to hear the report on the efficacy of the vaccination program; drastically diminishing the chance of catching and transmitting the virus. On top of that it massively reduces the severity of the virus if caught, evidenced in huge drops of hospital admissions and deaths. The fact that most at RPC are double vaccinated gives us even more confidence to move forward.
4. **God is in control**- Whilst we do not use this as an excuse to be irresponsible or dismissive of peoples concerns, we should certainly remember that our lives and indeed the world are in God’s hands and not the fate of a virus. Fear should never be a motivating factor in our decisions. We can be sure that Covid didn’t take the Lord by surprise and that he still, ‘works out all things together for good.’

I appreciate there are varying views and levels of concern, even within RPC. Some would like a return to ‘normal’ straight away, if not yesterday; whilst others would prefer us to draw the reigns in even more than we are currently. So, I am sure that the proposal for moving forward will sit differently with us all. However, as I have seen throughout the pandemic so far, to each of our credit, I am confident that we will move forward with a sense of grace and mutual understanding. As always, we welcome people’s affirmations, concerns, and suggestions. The following is not quite in stone yet 😊 and will be under regular review.

**Plans moving forward.**

* **Yes, to congregational singing**- Whilst there was mixed messaging from the government in certain areas, it was great to hear Savid Javid give a clear green light for churches to resume congregational singing. I am sure a great big Hallelujah bellowed across the churches in England. Out of all the restrictions imposed, I feel this was the most difficult and most keenly felt at RPC. It will also be the one we will most happily lay aside. Our voices can now join our hearts in singing out His praise!
* **No compulsory mask wearing**- This has been one of the most disliked aspects of the covid rules in society at large. To add to this there is huge debate as to the effectiveness of masks. The recent polls show that there are strongly held contrasting views. With the mixed messaging on masks, we are left with a little inner conflict as to what we should do, as individuals, but in the context of church too. We have decided, like the government to allow people to make their own decision. Naturally, people can clearly choose to wear a mask and I am sure some will.

However, for the following reasons people will also be free not to wear them.

1) The free choice given by the government.

2) The freedom to sing, with no stipulation to wear a mask, by government officials.

3) Vaccination success, both in society at large but especially amongst those at RPC.

4) Church context- We are not a busy supermarket or subway carriage with literally 1000’s walking through the doors day in day out, nor are we packed in like sardines. The church building is large and airy, with plenty of space to move around and mingle. It is the same 50 people or so, for only a couple of hours once a week.

I have expanded on this point because like in society it has the potential to divide people. We don’t want that to happen at RPC. Whilst we can see why folk feel they should wear a mask, there are good reasons for pushing ahead towards freedom and normality, too. We want to respect both groups of people giving each the freedom to choose. We also want to make sure that everyone feels safe, so we have a few ideas around seating arrangements if folk are nervous about others not wearing masks around them. Please let me know if you feel this.

* **Relaxed social distancing-** We do have the freedom now to discard social distancing. However, like with the mask wearing we will build in some flexibility. We are not proposing to put all the chairs together initially, but we will have the freedom to sit with whom we choose, be it our family group, friends, or anyone else. In addition, we will be able to mingle freely before and after the service.
* **Sunday refreshments back on the menu**- Our first two prayer breakfasts have been great and the fellowship around the table really appreciated. We are looking to extend that to our Sunday morning as we begin serving refreshments again. Initially Margaret and Gill have kindly offered to run this, though I am sure they will be open to help, once things get moving.
* **Back to care groups**- I must confess care group on Zoom has been a highlight over this period; not that I prefer it over meeting in the homes, but as a second-best option, it has excelled my expectations. From much of the feedback, I’m not the only one. In fact, your enthusiasm to meet and engagement during the meetings have been a real encouragement. That being said, I can’t wait for us to start meeting together again. The government have now given the green light, removing the limit of 6 people in homes. We would like to start back on 10th August, following the joint meeting with Proff. Andy Mcintosh on 3rd. I have had over 15 get back to me already, almost unanimously keen to start back. If you normally attend a care group or would like to, please get back to me and let me know whether you are happy to start back on the 10th.

As a church leadership we want to thank you all for your patience, enthusiasm and understanding during this covid season and look forward to serving with you in the new and exciting season before us. May the Lord work powerfully in and through our lives to the glory of His name.

Blessings Martin