

Mask or no mask: Gilbert church finds new ways to please all congregants

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GILBERT, Ariz. - A new government study found [two masks are better at stopping COVID-19 than one](#), but many churches in the Valley don't require a mask, despite the Maricopa County mask mandate.

The vast majority of people wear masks, but no matter what, some simply won't, especially when they're worshipping.

So how are churches and doctors handling those that won't put masks on?

A search of Valley churches reveals how every place of worship has handled the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) differently. Some are recommending masks, while others strictly require them. Now many are choosing a third option: one service requiring masks, another merely recommending them.

"People are still frustrated. That's the strategy [Redemption Church](#) in Gilbert took," said Pastor Neil Pitchel. "We still get critiqued, we still get people who are frustrated, but we truly believe the need for community is so great that we wanted to provide options for people on both sides of the spectrum."

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He stressed they remove a third of their seats and separated rows by six feet. And they still broadcast services online.

"I appreciate the kind of clever ways they're trying to figure out how to do it," said Dr. Ross Goldberg, President of the Arizona Medical Association.

Goldberg said he feels for pastors like Pitchel, trying to heal a divide, but says masks need to be worn, even while worshipping.

"Masks right now have a significant short term impact of stopping the spread of this disease, especially with this new variant popping up."

MAP: [Arizona Coronavirus cases by zip code](#)

We asked Maricopa County officials if their mask mandate applies to churches, but they said they have no regulatory authority over the space.

"We want to provide that vehicle for people to be together, to be worshipping, to have that sense of God's involvement in their lives and still be safe at the same time. And it's a tough balancing act."

Maricopa County officials said if any mask enforcement were to be done at churches, it would be up to local authorities.

Gilbert Police say they believe churches fall under the mask mandate, but told me they haven't received any complaints about mask violations at any church.