

**From:** Schumacher, Eric <eric@gabcames.org>  
**Sent:** Monday, March 1, 2021 5:31 PM  
**To:** City Council and Mayor  
**Subject:** Exemption Request on Face Covering Mandate

[External Email]

Dear Members of the Ames City Council,

I'm writing to request an exemption from the mask ordinance for religious services at Grand Avenue Baptist Church of Ames (GABC), where I organize and facilitate services.

Thank you for your leadership and service throughout this pandemic. I am sure it has not been easy. Thank you for seeking to serve our city well.

I make this appeal based on (1) our COVID precautions compared to other exemptions and (2) the science on singing and COVID.

**(1) Our COVID precautions are safe than Ames restaurants.**

I eat at Ames eating establishments and coffee shops multiple times weekly to support both local businesses and the economy. I often find the food establishments full (indoors) of customers at tables and booths. The customers unmask as soon as they sit down and remain unmasked until leaving. The booths and tables are often less than six feet apart. Customers are talking and laughing loudly during an hour-long meal. Servers move from table-to-table carrying utensils, cups, and plates. I have yet to see a restaurant shut down for such an arrangement. Thus, I conclude the City of Ames finds the practice both acceptable and safe.

When GABC resumed meeting in person, we arranged our sanctuary seating such that groups are no larger than seven persons and are a six-foot distance from other groups. We offer a "No Singing Section" in our foyer. We also offer two "Masks Only" rooms for those who do not wish to congregate with those who do not mask (e.g., exempt persons). When the Ames Mandate took effect, we posted clear signs at our entrances explaining that the City of Ames mandate requires face coverings (unless exempt). We seek compliance only as the City does, through education and encouragement only.

The arrangements described above far surpass what the City of Ames tolerates at food establishments. We limit our service to one hour (the duration of a typical lunch). Furthermore, unlike a food establishment, we have minimal speaking by the attendees. At the beginning of the service, we have responsive readings, which total less than two minutes of the congregation speaking together. We sing three songs, which average a total of nine minutes. The congregational is speaking or singing for a total of 10-11 minutes. The rest of the service involves individuals on our platform praying, reading Scripture, and teaching.

**A person dining at an Ames Food Establishment is far more likely to contract COVID than someone attending our services.**

**(2) The "shared air" science demonstrates the safety of attending an *unmasked* GABC service.**

Concerns about singing in church services were raised after a March 2020 choir rehearsal in Skagit Valley, Washington became a superspreader event. One infected person attended this *non-masked* and *non-socially-distanced* event, leading to 50 others getting sick and one death.

A study published in the September 18 edition of the *Indoor Air* journal reports that "researchers estimated that shortening the rehearsal to 30 minutes would have reduced the infection rate from 87% to 12%."

Merely shortening the time singing (unmasked and *not socially distanced*) would have resulted in a significant decrease in the infection rate. A 30-minute rehearsal—without masks or social distancing—would have a 12% infection rate.

The total time our congregation speaks or sings aloud is one-third of the Skagit Valley event. This alone cuts our infection rate to 4%. If we factor in GABC's social distancing, the infection rate would be at or less than 1% for an unmasked service. (Bear in mind a significant percentage would still mask.)

**The "shared air" science demonstrates not only the safety of a GABC religious service, but it also shows that the safety far surpasses what is allowed by the City at a food establishment.** I fear applying the ordinance to religious services while letting diners at food establishments go unmasked for an hour encroaches upon religious liberties. While I certainly feel that governments have the right to declare health and safety standards, your application to our services seems to restrict the exercise of religion unequally and unnecessarily.

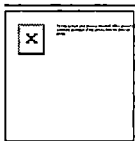
**We are a church that wants to honor the government and abide by the law. However, the City of Ames face-covering requirement hinders our fellowship in unequal and unnecessary ways.**

I trust that you make decisions based on what you believe to be in your citizens' best interest. I hope that the information above demonstrates that granting GABC (or all churches) an exemption poses no real risk to the City and its people.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Eric Schumacher



---

**Eric Schumacher**  
Associate Pastor, Grand Avenue Baptist Church  
515.232.8803  
gabcomes.org  
612 24th Street, Ames, Iowa 50010

