

House of Worship Q and A

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Religious Gatherings

Q: What are the guidelines regarding singing? Is this recommended or not recommended? How should we handle congregational responses during worship, both spoken and sung, along with group singing or clerical leader songs and chants. Do you recommend no musicians? A band?

A: Choirs and congregational singing are among the most dangerous activities because they generate a larger number of infectious aerosol particles over an extended period of time. Singing during services should be avoided and replaced with recorded music or live instrumental music.

For gatherings held outdoors, the risk is still present, though somewhat reduced, even if all congregants are appropriately distanced and wearing masks. Singing or call-and-response activities could undermine the efficacy of masks, even outdoors, as they may become saturated with moisture more quickly and serve as a less effective barrier.

If singing or recitation is an important part of a service, houses of worship could limit those activities to one individual—for example, a soloist or cantor—who is further distanced from the rest of the congregation. In such an instance, the use of a face shield or another clear barrier such as plexiglass between the individual and the rest of the congregation would increase safety. Another option includes remote viewing of the individual through video streaming. In cases where the individual faces away from the congregation, such as in Islamic prayer, no such barrier is necessary.

Wind and brass instruments should similarly be avoided until more research can determine their safety. A preliminary study suggests that some of these instruments may produce aerosol droplets in a similar fashion to singing.

Q: County guidance says that everyone over 2 years old will be required to wear a face mask in accordance with the state executive order, but the state executive order says that adults shall use reasonable efforts to cause children 2-9 to wear face coverings. Which is it, required or reasonable efforts?

A: Per the Local Public Health Officer's order: Everyone must wear a face covering unless they are children under the age of two or unless someone has a health condition or disability that makes it difficult to wear a face covering.

Q: Can you define household, and how many people?

A: A household is any number of people who live together in the same home. It could be one person, could be a family of six.

Q: Can you clarify the space issue? Are committee meetings, 12-step meetings, etc. limited to 200 square feet per person/family? Such meetings in our church are not held in the religious ceremony space. What about balconies, is that space included? How about nursery or Sunday school areas?

A: The area is measured using length X width. For example, 50 X 50 is 2500 sq. ft. which is 12 household groups or individuals. They also must follow the general guidance outlined in Executive Order 082-20. No non-religious ceremony gathering of more than 50 people is permitted in Montgomery County, regardless of the venue or space in which it is held.

Q: Can our church have a non-ceremonial gathering, like an outdoor movie night with more than 50 people?

A: No non-religious ceremony gathering of more than 50 people is permitted in Montgomery County, regardless of the venue or space in which it is held.

Q: What about other functions like funerals? Are they allowed within the restrictions and guidelines?

A: Religious wedding and funeral ceremonies that take place inside or outside of a religious facility do not have the 50-person maximum. They must still follow the 1 person or household per 200sqft of religious ceremony space.

Q: Is there any direction on limiting individuals who are identified as "vulnerable" to attend religious activities?

A: It is strongly recommended that anyone who is identified as 'vulnerable' should avoid attending mass gatherings of any kind in person. Consider the use of technology solutions to allow vulnerable populations to attend services virtually.

Q: Any chance for a Montgomery County Training for COVID Chaperones? Persons in our Faith Communities who will help us follow social distance.

A: We'll look into options for providing a training or additional information for those serving in this role. For further updates on the progress, please subscribe to the Faith Community Advisory Council (FCAC) newsletter at: www.montgomerycountyinterfaithmd.org

Q: Where can I find the CDC guidance for Houses of Worship?

A: CDC Guidance for Community and Faith-Based Organizations can be found at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html>

Q: What about the recommended time frame between worship services? In the earlier interim guidance, it was four hours. Then I saw two hours.

A: The time between services is determined by the size of your facility and the number of congregants present for each service. Basically, you should allow enough time after one service for the congregants to exit the facility, and to clean and disinfect all commonly touched surfaces before allowing congregants to enter the facility for the next service. You should avoid situations where people gather in the lobby area, where distancing requirements are difficult to maintain.

Q: What is being done to help those faith groups that use Public schools to have services?

A: The primary goal for MCPS is to provide a safe environment for educating their students. MCPS facilities remain closed while determining whether to open for public use without students.

Q: Can a worshipper by Montgomery county law sue the church or a mosque for contracting Covid19?

A: The short answer is, yes, anyone may sue an establishment for any number of reasons. As long as you follow the Executive Order, the Health Officer's Directive on masks, and any CDC/Maryland Department of Health guidance, you should be able to defend against such claims. It is recommended that you consult with your house of worship's legal counsel for their advice.

Q: The Governor's guidance on reopening houses of worship were by percent of capacity. Why is the county different?

A: Facility capacities are set by the Fire Marshall, and are based ingress/egress and the ability to safely and effectively evacuate in an emergency, so basing guidance on a percentage of capacity does not translate well to protecting against communicable diseases.

Q: Is everyone in the building required to have a mask?

A: Face covering is required by the Governor and the County in indoor gatherings.

Q: Is there a penalty if guidelines are not followed? Who is responsible for the penalty if the members of the congregation are refusing to follow guidance?

A: Regarding enforcement, the County's first priority is education. We will work collaboratively to answer questions and provide guidance. Call 311 for enforcement issues. Public Health Services Licensure and Regulatory Services will follow up.

Q: If there is a 50-person limit for general outdoor gatherings why is there no limit for religious gatherings. What is the rationale for that?

A: While there is no maximum number of people who may attend religious services, they are limited by the amount of religious ceremony space available. For many people, attending religious services is not only essential to their spiritual well-being, but also contributes to their emotional and mental health. Supporting overall well-being is part of the County's response to the pandemic and allowing religious services to have more than 50 people could help--as long as they adhere to the 1 person or household per 200 sq. ft of religious ceremony space requirement.

Q: Is there guidance on transporting members to church in personal vehicles that are not in your household?

A: The same precautions should be followed as when riding in any vehicle with non-household members, i.e., wearing of face coverings, maintaining safe distance between passengers as much as possible, allowing fresh outside air to circulate through the vehicle, proper cleaning/disinfecting of the vehicle before and after the transport, etc.

Q: How do the rules apply to non-worship meetings?

A: All meetings and gatherings occurring at a house of worship, whether or not they involve worship, must comply with the 1 person or family unit per 200 square feet rule with no maximum number of individuals.

Q: What guidance would you provide about tracking attendance and what information would you want if a person within our congregation was infected and attended a service?

A: You may want to consider using registration for services so you can track who attends. This would allow contact tracing if necessary.

Q: What are the guidelines for church offices and administrative business?

A: Church offices and administrative functions should follow rules on Office Spaces.
<https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/covid19/reopening/requirements/office-space.html>

Q: Why are houses of worship more restrictive than general businesses? Is this not discriminatory?

A: Retail stores that were closed in phase 1, are now open with a maximum occupancy of 1 patron per 200 sq. ft of sales space.

Q: Can you adjust distance to 10 or 12 sf per individual, for those attending alone? Also, if there are 2 individuals in a family, would it be feasible to just have them side by side and then 12sf around them?

A: The 200 square foot rule applies to a single individual or to a family unit, so family members may sit together within the 200 square foot space. There is no reduction in the space for an individual attending alone.

Q: Does this mean that I can only have one car in 200 feet?

A: No limit for in your car, drive in services. That is different from the congregation assembling on the grass or in chairs on a lot

Cleaning Requirements

Q: Are there any specific cleaning and disinfecting instructions for the facility? What are the rules regarding bathrooms?

A: CDC guidance on Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility can be found at:
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>. A list from the EPA of Disinfectants for Use Against SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) can be found at:
<https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2-covid-19>

Q: Any guidance on air ventilation systems?

A: CDC has guidance on HVAC systems located at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/office-buildings.html> Guidance from CDC specific to houses of worship can be found at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/faith-based.html>

Q: Aren't toilet lids important? Seems like that should be a concern for multi-stall bathrooms.

A: Recent CDC information says that flushing a toilet can result in the virus being held in the air for 5 minutes or more. Also we have been told that the virus can be expelled in both fecal matter and urine. This makes the issue of restrooms even more important. Frequent cleaning of restrooms is strongly recommended.

Testing Information

Q: Where can I get information on testing?

A: The most current information on county testing may be found on the county's COVID-19 testing information page at <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/covid19/testing.html>. Included on the page is information about free testing at county test sites, testing options for the insured and uninsured, and a testing location map.

Q: With test kits not available and testing not significantly happening, how are we to know actual cases are going down this much?

A: We are receiving 20,000 test kits per week and there are fewer than that who NEED to be tested. We are working toward having testing widely available for anyone to help identify those asymptomatic carriers. 2,000 tested per day now, and over 8% of the population of the County has been tested.

Q: How is the county doing with contact tracing. How many new positives are traced?

A: A contact investigation is initiated for all positive COVID-19 cases. Generally, the local health department of the jurisdiction in which the individual with the positive result resides conducts contact tracing. Maryland has also contracted with NORC at the University of Chicago, one of the largest independent social research organizations in the United States, to assist in contact tracing efforts. <https://coronavirus.maryland.gov/pages/contact-tracing>.

Q: What is the plan if we see COVID starting to spike once again in August or September? Will the County Executive or the Governor close things down? If so, what is the threshold they will use to determine that?

A: Not all spikes are created equal. It will depend if the case surge can be linked to a specific event, then actions will be taken to address those specific events/situations. If an increase in

cases is more generalized and widespread, the County will not rule out more generalized restrictions.

General Information

Q: How do I receive newsletters and updates from the Faith Community Advisory Council?

A: Visit Faith Community Advisory Council (FCAC) and sign up for newsletter at: www.montgomerycountyinterfaithmd.org. To contact Rev. Mansfield "Kasey" Kaseman (FCAC, and Interfaith Community Liaison), email: Mansfield.kaseman@montgomerycountymd.gov or Yasmine Eleazar at Yasmine.Eleazar@montgomerycountymd.gov

Q: How can I access information about hospitalizations, number of cases, test positivity, etc.?

A: The Montgomery County COVID-19 Data Dashboard is located at: <https://montgomerycountymd.gov/covid19/data/>. The state's dashboard is located at: <https://coronavirus.maryland.gov/>

Q: How do I reach someone with additional public health questions?

A: Additional public health questions may be sent to HHSmail@montgomerycountymd.gov.