

## Questions Submitted for Conversation with Marge Higgins on 3/16/21

- 1) What specific implications do the Governor's new guidelines announced on Friday have for our churches?
- For **Services and Ceremonies**: There is no capacity % limit, just the requirement that you allow for 6' of distance between households.
  - For **Gatherings/Receptions**: Increase capacity to 50% up to 250 people.
  - Gatherings with **Food & Beverages**: people must be seated at tables of no more than 6 people (household number restriction has been removed).
  - **Private Social Gatherings**: Increased to 15 people indoors, 50 outdoors (household number restriction has been removed).

Venue/Activity Description	Previous Requirements	Requirements Starting Monday, March 15, 2021 at Noon
Faith <b>Services and Ceremonies</b> (Including weddings, funerals, and other seated events)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 50% Capacity</li> <li>• Social Distance of 6 ft. between households</li> <li>• Wear face coverings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Occupancy limit is removed but capacity must be adjusted to allow for Social Distance of 6 ft. between households</li> <li>• Wear face coverings</li> </ul>
<b>Receptions or Celebrations</b> , Gatherings in venues with or without food and beverages*, indoor or outdoor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 25% Capacity up to 250</li> <li>• Social Distance of 6 ft. between households.</li> <li>• Wear face coverings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 50% capacity up to 250 people</li> <li>• Limit capacity to allow for Social Distance of 6 ft. between groups of 6 people.</li> <li>• Wear face coverings.</li> </ul>
*Gatherings in venues <b>with food and beverages</b>	In addition to the above: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People must be seated when consuming food and beverages.</li> <li>• Table size is limited to 6 people from up to 2 households.</li> <li>• No food or beverages (except for water) between 11 p.m. and 4 a.m.</li> </ul>	In addition to the above: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People must be seated when consuming food and beverages.</li> <li>• Table size is limited to 6 people.</li> <li>• No food or beverages (except for water) between 11 p.m. and 4 a.m.</li> </ul>
<b>Private social gatherings</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indoors: up to 10 people from 2 households</li> <li>• Outdoors: up to 15 people from 3 households</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indoors: 15 people</li> <li>• Outdoors: 50 people</li> </ul>

- 2) How does the vaccine rollout change our plans for returning to in-person worship? Our plan was based solely on the numbers of cases in our area, and I don't know what the best way to modify that (based on science!) would be.
- Continue to consider the case rates in your area.
  - You can also look at the vaccination rate in your congregation and determine a %.
  - Consider the number of high-risk or more vulnerable people in your congregation.
  - Consider how much "risk" is comfortable or not comfortable.
- 3) Since we have already gone back to in-person worship, what data should I monitor to determine whether to go back to completely virtual?
- Consider the following:
- If the case rate in your area goes above 5% (or the level comfortable for you)
  - If you have an outbreak or several separate cases in your faith community.
  - If you hear of outbreaks in your immediate area (local community).

- 4) The biggest thing missing right now is fellowship. When and how can we let people linger over coffee?
  - They can do this now, if they are seated at tables of no more than 6.
- 5) Can we plan service days or mission week for youth?
  - You can plan these days, but know that we cannot predict the future.
  - Outdoor activities are safer than indoors.
  - The “mission week” will need to follow the current guidance of the venue they are held in – some youth programming, overnight “camps” or other guidance may apply.
  - Remember, youth vaccination has not been approved yet, and they can be asymptomatic carriers of the virus. Consider the vulnerability of your greater community and the impact these activities will have on families and the larger community. We have seen many outbreaks related to the resuming of sports and school activities in recent weeks.
  - The further out you can plan, the better. We hope vaccination to reach “herd immunity” occurs sometime this summer, but we cannot predict exactly when this might happen. The new variants also add some concern to this type of planning.
- 6) How much time between worship services is enough for air to clear? Should frequently touched surfaces be sanitized in between services?
  - There is no exact time between services that we recommend. Well ventilated spaces would need less time than enclosed space with poor ventilation.
  - If you can wipe down door handles and frequently touched surfaces, that would be ideal. Make your space as touch-free as possible and encourage hand sanitizing.
  - Masking, distancing and hand sanitizing will all work to minimize these risks and are the most important and effective tools we have.
- 7) Can fully vaccinated people from different households sit closer than 6 feet apart in pews?
  - Yes, in groups of up to 6 people – to remain consistent with other guidance. This also continues to provide some protection from exposing larger groups if someone in that group is an asymptomatic carrier. The vaccines are very good, but not 100% and we still want to act with caution until a greater number of people are vaccinated.
- 8) Is there still a capacity limit for worship in churches, or simply whatever can be managed with proper distancing?
  - No capacity % or # limits for services and ceremonies, just the 6’ distancing requirement and adjusting your capacity to allow for that.
- 9) Should vaccinated people still be required to mask when attending in-person church activities?
  - Yes. We know vaccinated persons can contract the virus, and we know that the vaccine prevents severe illness in those persons. It is not yet known if vaccinated persons can become asymptomatic carriers, or how contagious they might be.
- 10) What defines “herd immunity”? How can we identify that our specific town/community has herd immunity? Is there a reasonable guess on when most communities in MN will have reached herd immunity?
  - No “guesstimates” at this time. Herd immunity is generally thought to be about 80% of the population. MDH will be sharing more about that information when we get closer to it. It is hard to know how long, given that vaccines for children are still awaiting approval, and there are many in our communities who are not wanting to be vaccinated for various reasons.

- 11) How do the variants we're hearing so much about play into our decision-making about resuming in-person activities?
- This is one of the main issues for us to remain cautious in our approach. The variants spread much more easily and faster than the original COVID-19 strain.
  - If you are seeing an increase in cases – in any strain – consider the impact on your community.
- 12) What guidelines does MDH offer now about singing in worship? How will we know when it's safe to return to regular singing in worship?
- It is "safer" not to sing as a group for as long as we are in this pandemic.
  - Masking while singing is safer than not masking – and it is required at this point.
  - The lower the case rate, the greater the vaccination rate, the safer. You have to decide the risk tolerance of your own community.
- 13) Our church has determined that we will require a 50% rate of vaccination in the county for outdoor worship, & a 70% rate of vaccination in the county for indoor worship. Does that still make sense?
- This is an example of a thoughtful approach based on your community's risk tolerance.
  - Some faith communities are not wanting to re-open to in-person services until there are 4 weeks of less than 4% case positivity rate in their county as another measure to watch. (schools have used 5% in the past).

Other questions (to clergy colleagues) for small group discussion:

- 1) Are others tracking who has been vaccinated or isn't yet vaccinated in your churches? If yes, how are you using that information?
- 2) Should we wait to resume in-person worship (and other activities) until "all" have been vaccinated, or resume in-person activities now but only for those who've been vaccinated already? What are the ethical or equity elements of those questions?