

Dear Montana Baptists:

Today, Governor Bullock issued guidance for ending his stay-at-home order. I know many of you have sought to accommodate the governor's order and will be glad to be able to resume worship and other activities without being in violation of his order. Here is what the governor's document says about places of worship in Phase One of the re-opening:

- PLACES OF WORSHIP can become operational on or after April 26, 2020 with reduced capacity and where strict physical distancing protocols can be maintained between non-household members. Avoid GATHERING in groups of more than 10 people in circumstances that do not readily allow for appropriate physical distancing.

Here's how I understand this: Churches can resume regular weekly hours and worship services on or after April 26 without being in violation of the governor's stay-at-home orders. However, people who are sick or potentially more vulnerable to COVID-19 should consider staying at home. People should not gather in groups larger than ten without practicing six-foot distancing. For larger gatherings, people who have been living under the same roof during the stay-at-home order can sit together in church without needing to maintain the six-foot rule. Otherwise, the six-foot distancing rule applies. Churches should be careful that people do not bunch up anywhere. This will be especially important when people are entering and leaving the building for worship. When people leave, perhaps it would be helpful to have members leave by rows to help prevent bunching up. There is an expectation for heightened sensitivity to sanitizing areas that people come into contact with, as well. Essentially, the only limitation on the size of your meetings if you want to work within the governor's guidance is determined by the six-foot distancing rule for groups larger than ten people. Ultimately, the governor is letting county health departments speak into precisely how this will look in each county. I'm told that churches in Yellowstone, Lewis and Clark, and Gallatin counties should reach out to their county health departments for more specific guidance from them. The guidance I provided above has been vetted with the Yellowstone County Health Department. I'll be working at trying to get answers from the other two counties, as well.

This has been a challenging time for all of us. I am deeply impressed by the way so many of our churches and pastors have responded in these past weeks. Please know that I'll be praying for you as you get back to normal. If I or anyone at the MTSBC can be helpful, just let us know.

Blessings,

Barrett