May 12, 2020

Hi All,

Please see the following summaries as we continue to attempt to make “sense” of all the latest information.

**MI STATE EXECUTIVE ORDER 77**

In Governor Whitmer’s Executive Order EO 77 published on May 7 (see attached), she has released restrictions in some manufacturing areas and also extended the Stay at Home mandate until May 28.

Of particular interest to church leaders is the language contained under provision #16:

“Consistent with prior guidance, neither a place of religious worship nor its owner is subject to penalty under section 20 of this order for allowing religious service at such place. No individual is subject to penalty under section 20 of this order for engaging in or traveling to engage in religious worship at a place of religious worship or for violating section 15a of this order.”

My perspective is that EO 77 is stating that pastors/churches/congregants will not be legally charged as a misdemeanor (section 20) if they conduct religious services. However, this does not absolve everyone of the responsibility to maintain social distancing, the numbers of people allowed to congregate, and other precautions associated with both National and State guidelines.

This raises an important question: “Just because a church CAN do something without being prosecuted, SHOULD they?”

At the same time, I notice that the following is still a part of EO 77:

1. This order must be construed broadly to prohibit in-person work that is not necessary to sustain or protect life.
2. Subject to the exceptions in section 7 of this order, all individuals currently living within the State of Michigan are ordered to stay at home or at their place of residence. Subject to the same exceptions, all public and private gatherings of any number of people occurring among persons not part of a single household are prohibited.

**MI SAFE START**

The Governor has issued the MI SAFE START guidelines (full copy attached) that identify Six Phases related to reopening the economy. Please note that the State is also divided into 8 Regions with the intention of dealing with each Region in a specific manner. Her current assessment is that Michigan is now in Stage 3. While nothing is specifically mentioned about churches, the following certainly applies to us as “organizations:”

**Phase 3**

This phase occurs when daily new cases and deaths remain relatively constant over a time period. Often, this occurs because communities have started to use social distancing practices and transmission rates have fallen to manageable levels. Because new cases are not constantly increasing, health system capacity has time to expand to epidemic needs and is not typically overwhelmed. During this phase, testing and contact tracing efforts are ramped up statewide. To prevent each infected individual from spreading the virus unchecked, rapid case investigation, contact tracing, and containment practices are necessary within a community.
**Businesses and organizations**

Non-critical businesses that pose lower risk of infection are able to open with increased safety measures during this phase:

- **Retail:** Limited to grocery stores and other critical retail (e.g., pharmacies), plus curbside or delivery for nonessential retail
- **Public Transportation:** Permitted
- **Restaurants & Bars:** Available for take-out, delivery and drive-through only
- **Manufacturing:** Permitted with additional safety measures and guidelines
- **Construction:** Permitted with additional safety measures and guidelines
- **Food & Agriculture:** Permitted
- **Offices:** Closed to all non-critical workers
- **Education & Child Care:** Remote learning in K-12 and higher education, child care for critical workers and anyone resuming work activities
- **Outdoor work:** Permitted with additional safety measures and guidelines

**Personal and social**

- **Social Distancing:** In place, maintain a six-foot distance from other when outdoors / in public
- **Face coverings:** Required
- **Gatherings:** Not permitted
- **Outdoor Recreation:** Walking, hiking, biking, golfing, boating permitted
- **Quarantine/Isolation:** Individuals who have confirmed or suspected COVID-19 must isolate, and any individual with a known exposure must quarantine, according to CDC and public health guidance
- **At-risk populations:** All at-risk individuals should continue to shelter in place. Members of households with at-risk residents should be aware that by returning to work or other environments where distancing is not possible, they could carry the virus back home. Precautions should be taken to isolate from at-risk residents. Businesses should strongly consider special accommodations for personnel who are members of an at-risk population

Note: You are not alone if you note a discrepancy between EO-77 and the Phase 3: “Gatherings: not permitted”

**NATIONAL CDC**

When the President announced the 3 Phase Opening Up America Again, States were given guidelines for each phase before they could move forward in the process. As I understand Phase 1, a State needs to experience a downward trajectory of documented Covid19 cases/hospitalizations/etc. over a two week time frame.

Some States have already met the Phase 1 Guidelines and are moving through Phase 2, while others have not. Under Phase 2 of the President’s guidelines, “All individuals, WHEN IN PUBLIC (e.g., parks, outdoor recreation areas, shopping areas), should maximize physical distance from others. Social settings of more than 50 people, where appropriate distancing may not be practical, should be avoided unless precautionary measures are observed.” And “LARGE VENUES (e.g., sit-down dining, movie theaters, sporting venues, places of worship) can operate under moderate physical distancing protocols.”

Under Phase 3 of the President’s guidelines, VULNERABLE INDIVIDUALS can resume public interactions, but should practice physical distancing, minimizing exposure to social settings where distancing may not be practical, unless precautionary measures are observed.” And LARGE VENUES (e.g., sit-down dining, movie theaters, sporting venues, places of worship) can operate under limited physical distancing protocols.
SO HOW DO WE MERGE/RECONCILE ALL OF THE ABOVE (AND MORE)?

Drive In Services (with no limit on the numbers of people) are certainly allowed if people remain in their cars and maintain social distancing (typically allowing one car space in between in case they roll their windows down). Some churches are using a low frequency FM transmitter so they do not use amplified live music/preaching that would interfere with neighbors. We certainly do not want to alienate them and create a “public nuisance” issue. Everyone that I know of who is doing Drive In Services has checked with the local police authorities in advance.

Back to my important question above, “Just because a church CAN do something without being prosecuted, SHOULD they?”

There is far more at stake here than simply not being prosecuted. We are dealing with our responsibility for the care and safety of our congregation and the larger community as well. As leaders, we want to do everything we can to engender trust, bolster confidence and give assurance.

So … let me offer some practical suggestions for when we do re-open our buildings (this will be long):

1. Develop a written plan and be certain it is distributed/communicated to everyone WELL BEFORE you re-open your building.
   - The congregation will not be returning to their previous “church experience.” There will new necessary policies/procedures in place. They should know what will be expected/required of them well before re-opening day so that you/your leaders/your volunteers do not have to have that awkward and potentially difficult conversation in the lobby.
   - Perhaps you can pre-send a short video or pictures showing how the seating will look, where the additional hand sanitizing dispensers will be located, etc.
   - Will you provide masks or ask individuals to be responsible for their own? Remember to communicate whatever you decide.
   - No handshakes or hugs, just waving and smiles to your friends.
   - No food service or congregating in the normal areas.
   - Observing (and cooperating) with 6 ft social distancing for the sake of everyone.
   - No in-building communion at this time.
   - Offerings being deposited in a container as people leave (no passing of plates/bags/etc).
   - How you will dismiss to eliminate over-crowding hallways (by rows, by sections?) and encouraging people to leave the building and go to their cars/talk outside, etc.
   - How will you handle the “orneries?” Yes, I know you have never encountered any of them, but I have heard rumors they exist ...

2. The 6 ft social distancing in both seating and lobby/hallway areas need to be maintained.
   - Buildings with chairs can easily accomplish this, but you can expect your seating capacity to be reduced to as low as 25% because you will want to group chairs together so families can be accommodated.
   - Buildings with pews or permanent seating will need to clearly indicate where seating is allowed (side to side) and leave every other row empty (front to back -- rows are typically 3 ft apart).
   - Monitoring/limiting restroom entrance so that a limited number of persons are entering in order to maintain 6 foot distance separation (except for a parent/guardian and his/her child).

3. No nursery, pre-school or children’s ministries are allowed. They must be seated with their families.

   In a recent email from the Michigan Department of Human Health and Services clarifying in-building worship services, they state “it is required that all individuals who leave their home or place of residence must adhere to social distancing measures recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, including remaining at least six feet from people from outside the individual’s household to the extent feasible.”
4. The “under 50” gathering restriction limits need are a part of the CDC guidelines mentioned above.
   
   - Smaller churches will be able to accomplish this earlier/easier than larger ones. If larger than 50, multiple services can be planned in order to keep under the limit. You may consider scheduling them on alternate days (like a Sat PM and Sun AM or Sun PM) so that complete/deep cleaning can be accomplished in between.
   - You may want to consider shortening your normal service time to 1-hour family-friendly services.

5. Do not be pressured/rushed to re-open your building until you are truly ready. You probably may already be experiencing this from within your congregation as well as from the example of other surrounding churches that may choose to re-open before you. But it’s okay if you wait until you are fully prepared ...

6. Have new and clear signage prepared giving direction/reinforcing the guidelines you have previously sent.

7. Some things to continue:
   
   - Online services. There will be individuals who are “at risk” and who will not yet feel comfortable gathering in groups.
   - Online/Text Giving. Give clear and easy directions to encourage this.
   - The increased contact/care being given by the congregation to each other that has developed.

Lastly, please be aware of that there may be people in your congregation taking photos and videos. If you are not following CDC/State/Local guidelines and these are posted, it could bring serious problems and consequences to the church. Note: A couple of independent churches in the Detroit area opted to open a couple of weeks ago. They made the local news … and not in a good way. In fact, they were excoriated by the news/public for not adhering to the common sense guidelines being provided to them.

People are now accustomed to businesses taking precautions and expect churches to be “at least as careful/thoughtful.” No one wants a church building to re-open and then have additional problems. It would be a terrible setback if someone became ill, traced it back to a congregation, and then have to let the congregation know it had been exposed.

There may be people in your community who may unfortunately be looking to mock the church of God. Let’s not give them reason.

If I were pastoring a local church, when would I plan to re-open our building?

Glad you asked … My advice/strong recommendation is to not plan to re-open until at least Sunday, May 31 after the Stay at Home order is lifted.

Yours in Jesus,

Jeff Hlavin
District Superintendent

JH/In