

Considerations about Resuming Face-to-Face Meetings for Worship

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The following is based on my considerable reading about the SARS-COV-2 virus, transmission rates and methods, factors that increase and decrease transmission, age- and health-specific recommendations for churches, businesses, and families, and host of other materials. I have included links to the most useful of these at the end of the article.

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Resuming face-to-face Meetings for Worship requires us to answer at least three separate questions. They are:

1. How much is SARS-COV-2 currently spreading in the San Antonio area?
2. How safe is an activity like Meeting for Worship for people of various ages and with various preexisting health concerns?
3. What adjustments to our normal Meeting for Worship are necessary and possible to prevent it from endangering the participants and those with whom they would come into later contact?

These questions are sequential. If the community rate of spread is high, then face-to-face Meeting for Worship is not safe for anyone. Once the rate of spread is low, we can consider for whom Meeting for Worship is safe and how to organize it to maximize safety. It behooves us, however, to begin planning the changes we will have to make. This will let us open in a limited way sooner than would otherwise be possible.

Here is some background about coronavirus transmission:

- The virus is most easily spread by air, either in large droplets from sneezes or coughs, or from smaller aerosols from talking, singing, shouting.
- It can be spread through feces and from touching infected surfaces and then touching one's nose or mouth, but these are secondary routes, not primary ones.
- An unknown percentage of those infected are asymptomatic carriers. Thus, the absence of active disease does not protect others.
- Wearing masks has two benefits. It protects the wearer from inhaling droplets, and less so, aerosols, and it protects other people from droplets and from some of the aerosols that the wearer emits. The latter also minimizes the risk that asymptomatic people pose.

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- That said, “wearing a cloth mask does not protect you much if you’re in close contact with someone who is COVID-19 contagious. It may give you 20 minutes, instead of 10, to avoid contracting the disease.” *A direct quote from Reading #5, below.*
- Keeping physical distance also protects both parties, because both droplets and aerosols are less concentrated the farther they are from their source. Keeping six feet apart (or one caribou, six ravens, one adult kangaroo, four trout, two sturgeon, or a pool noodle) minimizes the danger, though it does not eliminate it.
- The time spent interacting with others matters too: it affects the amount of virus that one either gives off or absorbs. Shorter interactions mean fewer virus particles. Like many things, the danger increases with the dose.
- The specific activities also make a difference. The virus infects the deep lungs, so deep breathing and exhalations increase the amount of virus one absorbs or gives off. Talking is thus better than singing. Walking is better than dancing or other aerobic activity. Sitting quietly is best of all.
- Outdoors is better than indoors – by a lot. Wind disperses all means of transmission.

In sum, the safest activities occur outside, in sanitized environments, with relatively few people who all wear masks, sit quietly, do not touch surfaces that might have been touched by others, and stay six feet apart. That sounds like a Quaker Meeting for Worship! Unfortunately, it’s not that simple.

NOW TO OUR THREE QUESTIONS:

1. How much is SARS-COV-2 currently spreading in the San Antonio area?

As of today, the short answer is “a lot”. You can see the recent spike on the chart embedded in this paragraph. The number of cases is now doubling every 13 days – a significantly shorter time than was the case two weeks ago. The chart at the top of the next page shows that each person with COVID-19 infects an average of 1.44 people (on a trailing 14-day moving average). That’s an exponential rise and is a large increase from the end of May. These results are not just from

increased testing, though there is more testing now than before. More disturbingly, the percent of those who tested positive

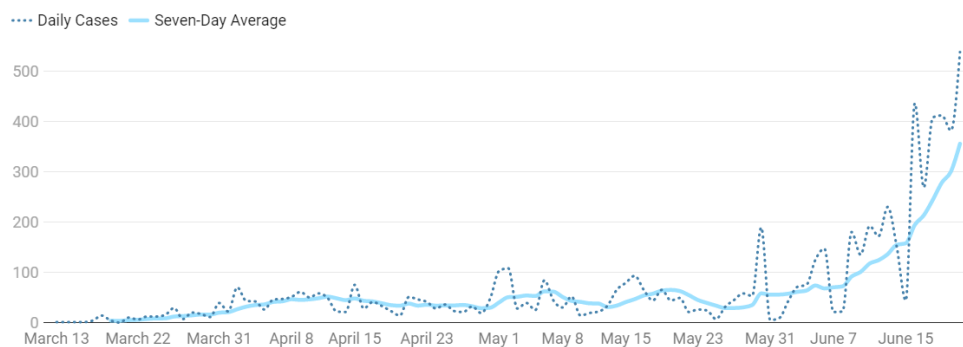
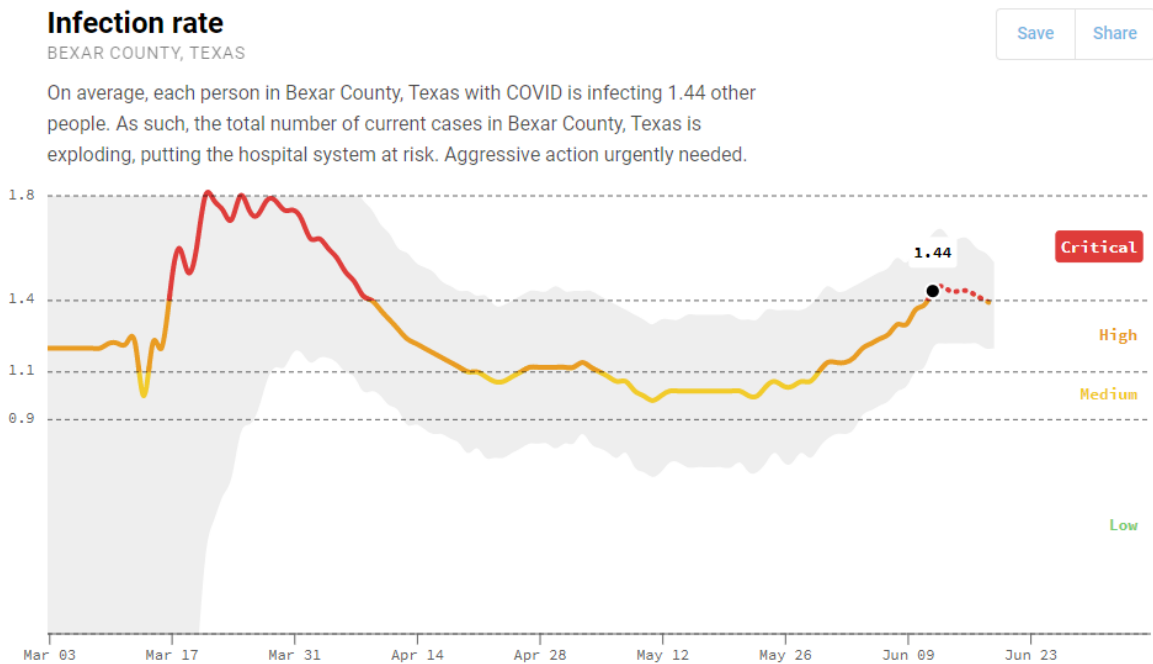


Chart: JJ Velasquez / Rivard Report • Source: City of San Antonio - Metropolitan Health District • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

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for infection has also climbed. Last Friday, the ratio was 19 positive cases for every 100 people tested. That number needs to be below 5 for any gatherings to be reasonably safe.



This high rate of increase threatens to overwhelm San Antonio’s hospital system. It also makes even small gatherings more likely to spread infection. **This indicates that the time for resuming face-to-face Meetings for Worship has not arrived.**

2. How safe is an activity like Meeting for Worship for people of various ages and with various preexisting health concerns?

I noted above that a small, distanced, masked, Meeting for Worship is relatively safe, as group activities go. Taking people’s temperatures when they arrive at Meeting will help, as will cleaning the bathrooms and surfaces before and after Meeting and ensuring that participants use hand sanitizer and wear masks. There is, however, the matter of age and health. This chart (from Reading #4) summarizes what we know now about COVID-19 susceptibility:

		Age-Related Risk Tiers		
		High (≥70)	Intermediate (50-69)	Low (<50)
Health-Related Risk Tiers	High (significant burden of organ-system disease)	A	B	C
	Intermediate (generally healthy)	D	E	F
	Low (healthy; no chronic medical conditions; no activity restrictions)	G	H	I

Here is the text that explains the various cell labels. The system was developed to guide people about returning to work, though we can draw conclusions for Meeting for Worship as well.

Cell **A** requires the strictest interdiction policies- sheltering in place- to prevent viral exposure due to very high risk of adverse outcomes. Cells **B** and **D** represent the next level of requirement, warranting strict social distancing, mask use, and active monitoring. Cells **A**, **B**, and **D** would not return to the worksite until the *all clear** is sounded. Cells **C**, **E**, and **G** can return to the worksite, but with social distancing and personal protection practices encouraged or mandated, plus monitoring. Cells **F** and **H** can return to the worksite with discretionary use of social distancing, personal protection. Cell **I** can return to the worksite with no precautions. Arrows represent opportunities to migrate from higher to lower risk tiers with health promotion / lifestyle medicine interventions.

**The "all clear" is achieved with herd immunity and near-zero viral transmission, whether due to native infection or vaccination.*

Note that people in cell A should stay home and people in cells B, C, D, E, and G should wear masks, take precautions, and have active infection monitoring. We can ensure mask use and social distancing, but we cannot provide monitoring. Cells F, H, and I seem the safest for attending meeting and cells G, E, and C are probably okay. Cells A, B, and D are the most at risk.

Demographically, Quakers skew toward the first two columns. This is a problem, as a single asymptomatic individual can spread infection rather far. Yet we cannot make relative youth a requirement for face-to-face meeting attendance, and the high degree of youth infection in the latest Bexar County spike indicates that no one is immune. We can, however, encourage older Quakers to continue attending by Zoom. In fact, we need to keep Meeting for Worship open to more than just physical attendance from here on out (*see Reading #13*). But the risk that our demographics pose is important to address.

3. What adjustments to our normal Meeting for Worship are necessary and possible to prevent it from endangering the participants and those with whom they would come into later contact?

This question is easier to answer in the short term than it is in the long. When the local SARS-COV-2 infection rate has again dropped, we will likely be able to meet outside, with a limited number of people, who commit to wearing masks, sanitizing hands, and keeping distance from each other. We will need to take people's temperatures on entry, provide hand sanitation stations, and have a store of extra masks for those who forget theirs. The city has generously provided a touchless instant thermometer, some masks, and a gallon of hand sanitizer. We already had two sanitizer dispensers.

We also have a porch that will serve for outdoor meetings, though we may need to add box fans to our overhead fans to keep the air moving and may need to move Meeting for Worship to 9am in the hot months. In the long run, we might want to build ourselves a gazebo such as the one at Hill House Meeting in Accra, Ghana, pictured at the top of the next page:

We could install misters to cool us during the summer and overhead heaters to warm us during the winter. This is premature, however. We do not know how long our current situation will last.



If we do meet on the porch, we will need to add a computer, projector, amplified speakers, and a microphone to make sure that Friends can join us by Zoom. We will need a secure storage locker for this equipment, lest it disappear as our previous equipment did a few years ago. We will need a set-up crew and a take-down crew. These are all potentially solvable problems.

We will not, however, be able to have potlucks or use the kitchen. An hour of unprogrammed meeting is all that we can expect together for the next several months. Infection rates increase with time and with the degree of interpersonal engagement. Even adding face-to-face forums is problematic until the pandemic has waned.

You will notice that I have said nothing about the children’s program. Opening that is much more difficult. Infection follows the same rules for kids as it does for adults, but they have a harder time keeping distance. Some of the readings below address this problem.

FOR FURTHER READING

1. Debbie Passey’s COVID-19 newsletters, online at <https://aitiaresearch.com/covid-19-newsletters/>
2. Brendan Gibbons: “Models Show How Fast Coronavirus Could Spread in Texas” The Rivard Report June 21, 2020 <https://bit.ly/3eq96kz>
3. Margot Sanger-Katz, Claire Cain Miller, and Quoc Trung Bui: “When 511 Epidemiologists Expect to Fly, Hug and Do 18 Other Everyday Activities Again” New York Times, June 8, 2020 <https://nyti.ms/3dnfpEf>
4. Drs. Darria Long and David L. Katz: “As Cities Move Toward Reopening, How to Manage Risks” Medium.com June 10, 2020 <https://bit.ly/3es2cvd>
5. Dan Buettner: “COVID-19: Straight Answers from Top Epidemiologist Who Predicted the Pandemic” Bluezones, June 6, 2020 <https://bit.ly/37YPf9W>

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6. City of San Antonio: “Economic Transition Team Report”, May 5, 2020 *The section on reopening churches is posted at <https://bit.ly/382Fgk1>*
7. Alison Aubrey, Laurel Wamsley, and Carmel Wroth: “From Camping To Dining Out: Here's How Experts Rate the Risks Of 14 Summer Activities” NPR, May 23, 2020 <https://n.pr/2V7rpDo>
8. CDC: “Interim Guidelines for Communities of Faith” May 22, 2020 *[This is the version released AFTER White House elimination of ‘objectionable’ elements.]* <https://bit.ly/2NI28BA>
9. Taylor DesOrmeau: “From hair salons to gyms, experts rank 36 activities by coronavirus risk level” M-Live June 2, 2020 <https://bit.ly/2YITqtc>
10. Amanda Mull: “So What Can We Do Now?” The Atlantic, May 27, 2020 <https://bit.ly/3epZUgd>
11. Leana S. Wen: “Four concepts to assess your personal risk as the U.S. reopens” Washington Post May 21, 2020 <https://wapo.st/3dseJNQ>
12. Deborah Netburn: “So you really want to see your friends? Here’s how to assess the risk” Los Angeles Times May 16, 2020 <https://lat.ms/2NhPbbG>

OF SPECIAL INTEREST TO QUAKERS

13. Bianca Giaever: “Can You Gather with God Over Zoom? Quakerism Goes Virtual, Offering an Intimate Window into Silent Worship.” New York Times June 7, 2020 <https://nyti.ms/2Z00j0u>