

Montgomery County City Council Members:

I am writing to you about this proposed executive order. I implore you to vote against it and ask for a revised executive order because of the unnecessary and contradictory requirements for religious facilities.

Under this new executive orders, religious facilities are permitted to meet inside with the existing 25% capacity rule and other guidelines, however outdoor services are restricted to only 25 people. For many churches that means more people can attend inside than outside. There is no logic in this considering that airflow outdoors is much better than indoors. Therefore, if a religious facility chose to have an outdoor service instead of an indoor service, it should be encouraged as a safer alternative. I would recommend allowing churches to continue with the 150 maximum outdoor gathering size outdoors that still requires the necessary wearing of masks, physical distancing, and registration. Allowing 25 people for a religious service is for most institutions not allowing a service at all. My experience as a faith leader is that it takes 10-20 people just to lead the various elements of the service, usher, check-in, etc., especially because of all of the COVID-19 guidelines.

I fully understand that the COVID-19 case numbers are increasing and that is of great concern. However, the current very restrictive measures on religious facilities already provide necessary precautions for people who choose to worship in person, a constitutional right. Please consider the court cases in California and the Supreme Court's recent decisions to support churches not having these kinds of limitations. Faith groups do so much for our community in so many ways. While many churches are providing virtual ways to worship and connect, that unfortunately is not enough for many of our county residents who strongly desire to worship at their religious facility. This has been done well and with compliance by our faith groups.

I acknowledge that religious facilities can apply for a letter of approval. However, this executive order comes just two weeks before Christmas Eve, when many churches have already set detailed, safe plans. Some of us have made the decision to move indoor services to outdoors that day to make an even safer environment for our congregations, but this executive order now makes that impossible. Please vote against it and request that those drafting these orders change the allowance for outdoor services.

Thank you all for your leadership during this difficult time.

Sincerely,

Jamie Swope

Montgomery County Resident

Montgomery County Church Leader